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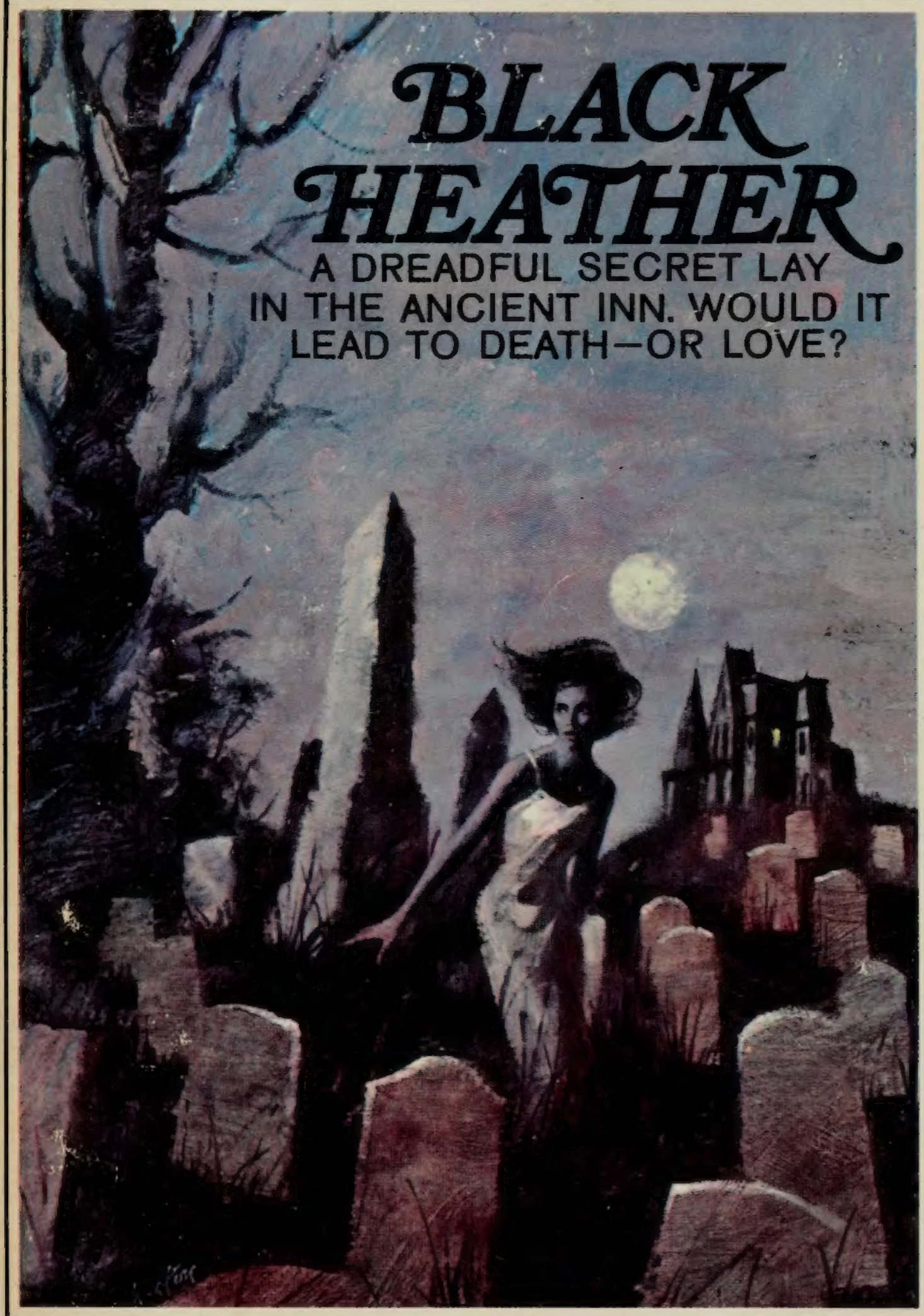
VIRGINIA COFFMAN



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THE HAUNTED INN

"Miss Megan was found buried in the debris, months after the fire," Meg told me. "She'd been struck on the head—there was still bloodstains. And folk say they see haunts of nights abovestairs at the Hag's Head."

I remembered Sir Nicholas Everett's penetrating eyes—and the searching gaze with which they had looked into mine. I shuddered and wondered whether buying the abandoned Hag's Head Inn was such a good idea. . . .

PUT PLEASURE IN YOUR READING
Larger type makes the difference
This EASY EYE Edition is set in large, clear type—at least 30 percent larger than usual. It is printed on scientifically tinted non-glare paper for better contrast and less eyestrain.

BLACK HEATHER

VIRGINIA COFFMAN

LANCER EDITIONS

LANCER BOOKS
NEW YORK

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"for Jo, whom Donnie and I call 'Sis,'
and for Jerry with all our love"

BLACK HEATHER

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CHAPTER ONE

THERE ARE times in the heathery flush of an autumn afternoon when it is more than usually dangerous for a stranger to be caught alone upon the moors of Yorkshire's West Riding. Suddenly, out of a thunderous sky come torrents of rain, and even the lightning forks cannot illuminate the sheep tracks one followed with confidence scarcely a moment before.

Thus it was with me that October day some years gone by when, badly drenched and seeking shelter, I came upon the Hag's Head Inn, a place haunted alike by a deed of horror and a legend grown up as prickly and grim as the now blackened heather that carpeted the heath in every direction around the desolate old Jacobean structure and its forsaken outbuildings.

I had ventured upon the moors an hour before the onrush of that storm, in pursuit of a truant tiger-striped kitten named Timothy. This little rogue belonged to the lady with whom I was lodged in the village while I looked for a building to purchase for a girls' school. Being a well-grown woman of eighteen, with both Somersetshire and Cornish blood, I should have known the dangers

implanted as deeply in that rugged Yorkshire wilderness as ever were found in my native Cornwall. But a mere matter of hours previously, I had come to apple-cheeked little Mrs. Sedley with letters from my mother, her old school friend, assuring the Yorkshirewoman and perhaps the local squire that I, Kathleen Bodmun, was conformable, reasonably well educated, and equipped in every respect to run a school for young females. I should not have said I was entirely conformable, for I have been accused of going my own way in my thoughts and sometimes my deeds, but my mother is inclined to put the best face upon such matters. In any case, it was important that I have a sponsor of some social importance whose name I might place on my prospectus when I advertised, and Mama chose Mrs. Sedley.

So I came to Yorkshire, and even as I was hearing all the difficulties of my undertaking described with relish by Mrs. Sedley, a faded, silly, but undaunted little woman bound to her chair by a disease of the joints, her kitten escaped through the stillroom door, thanks to the cook who was "indulging in a wee dram" of spirits, and my competence was called into play by my prospective sponsor.

Since this was my first chance to show competent handling of a bad moment, I was a trifle panic-stricken that afternoon when I rushed out of the house after the wretched animal and began to scramble up the rolling hills behind the moorside

village of Maidenmoor. I found myself following a reasonably legible sheep track, not too far behind young Timothy, and hoping, as you may suppose, that I should soon lay hold of that saucy little nemesis of mine.

A brisk climb put me up into the beginning of the heavier growth, the thick gorse and heather that covered the landscape in every direction under the enormous Yorkshire sky. Below me, the village was now gone from my sight in a fold of the hill. I paused there a few minutes, finding myself breathless and chilled, for I had had no time to snatch up either my bonnet or my cloak. Then I discovered I was still upon the right path. A half-grown shepherd's boy with a sharp, lightly freckled nose and a crippled foot obligingly confided to me that he had seen the kitten, and what is worse, he said in his grinning way, "I'd have took up the wee cat for ye, pretty love, if I know'd it was you who'd be asearching."

Very likely—now that it was too late! And since when were village pets the size of small Timothy allowed to roam freely over the moors where every pothole and every fast-running burn posed a danger to the poor creature? Let alone wild ponies or savage dogs that might be about; for Mama had warned me of the fierce tempers and desire for privacy common to these Yorkshire people who lived outside the villages. Savage dogs were the least of it, she said, if one crossed over the low stone fences that locked each man's land

from that of his neighbor. I would be lucky to escape with my life and would have no legal recourse even if shot!

I said to the boy, "Was the kitten running fast, do you think? Can I catch him?"

"Arunnin'? Not him," said the youth. "Asniffin' out the gorse hereabouts and gettin' all over prickles, like as not. It'll mean ye have a bad brushin' of his coat to do."

I thanked him briefly, whereupon he added as I turned and started on, hoping my muslin shirts would not be too badly splashed in mire, "Beware the guytrash, love. It'll tear the wee cat to shreds and eat on 'em."

Guessing he merely meant to alarm me, I felt like boxing the impudent lad's ears, but I could not dislike him as he grinned again and limped easily, almost gracefully, down the path after his vagrant flock.

And what under heaven was a guytrash?

I was not much moved by being addressed as the boy's "pretty love," since it seemed the custom of the North Country. The coachman of the rackety old York Mail, which had borne me to this part of the world had addressed any and all female passengers as "love." But I was still out of reason cross with Timothy, the kitten, and I hurried on, calling his name, trying to hold my skirts from flying in the rising wind. And so I found myself in the heart of the moor without being aware of it.

Suddenly, the sky began to come over dark as

night. I looked up and around me, and I knew I was in for it!

I did not above half like the look of those amazingly horrid thunderclouds that reached down as though to touch the endless prickly heath, which rolled about me like an inland sea. Nor was my position rendered easier by the wind that beat around my bare arms and shivered my summery skirts—for it was beginning to carry raindrops as well. Foolishly, I had been put off my common sense this morning by the clearness of the heavens and the deceptively sweet air full of the scent of late heather. Otherwise, I should never have been caught so, in a green-sprigged muslin round gown and my best flat-soled morocco slippers, instead of the sturdy garments and stout iron pateens worn by the local residents.

I shielded my eyes with one hand while the other hugged my chilled forearm and looked around once more for the errant Timothy. If I found no trace of him now, I should be quit of this place upon the instant and, at the least, save myself from taking a cold as my souvenir of the Yorkshire moors. I had long since abandoned hope of saving my garments. This visit to Mrs. Sedley was like to cost me dear. Surely, there were young ladies nearer home who might need schooling.

Just as I was giving up the search for Timothy, my glance encompassing only the bleak beauty of the rolling heathered sea, a small animal darted over the heath, becoming visible only as he crossed

the ambling little sheep track like a streak of tawny gold. He was so close I very nearly seized him, but then he was on his way again, barely seen now and again among the low-growing plantlife hereabouts. Determined not to be outfoxed by that little wretch, I stalked him carefully, several times mistaking the sway of the heather under the westerly wind for the fleeing Timothy's fur.

The downpour came with such suddenness that I fancied the heavens had ripped and emptied upon me. So powerful it was that I flung my hands over my head to shield myself and was blinded momentarily by its pelting fury. At the same time I felt an unaccustomed warmth against my ankle, rubbing and clinging. Horrified, I shook my foot, only to discover the kitten Timothy, clinging to me with sharp, tenacious claws. The poor little rogue was as unprepared as I for the deluge. I took him up to my bosom, and by fingering him in that furry white "cravat" under his chin, I tried to comfort and shield him as best I might. He was plainly terrified, and it was all I could do to keep him from ripping at me with his little claws in his panic. I understood his feelings very well, however, and could not blame him. Now that my mission was accomplished at considerable cost to my clothing, if nothing else, I turned and looked down at the earth, intending to follow the sheep track back to Maidenmoor.

Instead, I found the ground one shadowy mass of dying heather, clumps of gorse, and bits of rock

from the bygone assaults of nature. Through all this wild growth ran rivulets of water, so that what I saw was a hundred different paths, each as narrow as a sheep track. I looked up, my face and hair getting wetter by the minute, my cheeks beginning to burn with the force of the pelting, and tried to make out any high configurations on the horizon; for by this fashion I had often found my way back through the Devon and Cornish countryside. Such were the folds in the landscape and the great sweep of low, brooding heavens that I could make out only one object that might be a habitation. It was to the east, I thought, and Maidenmoor lay in the south, but no matter. Whoever lived in that dark clump of buildings—if buildings they were—must surely give me my bearings back to Maidenmoor. If no one lived there, at least I should find shelter for myself and my half-drowned charge until this storm blew over.

I began to run but soon gave over and walked more carefully, for I was in grave danger of being tripped by every bush and rock on the heath. Despite all my care, my shoes were soon filled with water, and the hem of my skirt dragged down with an accumulation of muddy twigs, thorns, and the debris of a rich autumn as the waters flowed among the moorland gorse. The ground itself was black as midnight, but on the nearing horizon there was still a curious mauve glow that formed a halo about the buildings toward which I hastened.

I saw that what I had taken for the typical moorland dwelling of a sheep farmer, perched upon a little rise, was actually a series of buildings. The largest was two-storied with attics and partially underground cellars, and there were several very small outbuildings clustered around it. As I mounted the hill to this center building of time-darkened York stone, my going was much easier. I had struck upon what had once been a road, though it was now overgrown with heather blooming beyond its season and turning black. My foot trod upon a large square of wood which sounded hollow as a drum under my weight. I paused an instant, seeing writing, or rather white lines, on wood, and despite the meowing protests of Timothy, I made out in the scant mauve light a repulsive human face drawn in white chalk or paint upon the wood. Whether the face was of man or woman I could not tell, but the hair that framed it was long, straight, and witch-like. The face itself had hideous staring eyes, an unnaturally long nose, and teeth like fangs. As I kicked the board aside I realized that it was a tavern sign; for just ahead on the rise of the hill was another splintered piece of the board bearing the name HAG'S HEAD INN. I was attempting to find shelter at a public house. I had never been in a public house without my parents, but one must learn to cope with awkward moments, so I went on toward the swinging, creaking gate of the Hag's Head.

There was one advantage to a public house—

very likely an innkeeper or stableboy might be found to lead me back to Maidenmoor. In any case, drenched as I was, and bearing a kitten beside all else, I could hardly be likely to tempt any of the gentlemen present into what Mama called "liberties"; I should much more probably be relegated to the kitchens, together with my mud and my rivulets of water, which poured off me in every direction. I paused at the creaking gate, which, I now saw with some unease, hung by one hinge. Inside the low stone wall, the garden of the inn was overgrown like the rest of the moor, and there were plainly no farm animals in the outbuildings or stables.

The rain had slackened a little, it seemed to me, as I raised my face to the front of the inn and studied its silent, dark, shuttered windows. The lilac haze that had lighted the moor before the storm still hung over the far hills beyond the inn to the east, but as I stared at the inn and realized it was abandoned, the storm broke again in full fury, lashing at the gate, at the stone wall, and at my body, which yielded rather more than did the gate and wall. I ran across the overgrown garden, feeling an occasional flagstone under my shoes, and flung myself at the door of the inn.

It was locked, of course, and the force of my banging upon the door jarred Timothy, whose pink little mouth opened wide to let out a howl and was immediately filled with rain. He spat and whined and had the wisdom to sneeze.

I backed off from the stoop and moved along under the windows of the ground floor, my feet sinking into ground softer than the turf of the moor. I could see that flowers or vegetables had once been planted where I was now walking. With my free hand I finally felt a broken, dangling shutter. Moving my fingers further, I discovered that most of the panes of the mullioned window had been broken. As I stood back, trying to make out the size of the opening, I felt sure that, having done my share of climbing and scrambling around my native countryside, I could get into the building through that half-open window. I must take care not to scratch myself on the edges where the unbroken panes met the ruined ones, but it was not too difficult. I reached up and dropped Timothy into the dark room through the broken panes. He must have fallen inside as gracefully as his kind usually does, for he did not whimper but gave an angry meow at this treatment, and I heard him no more. I seized hold of the sill with both hands and, taking a breath, quickly lifted myself up, thrust my feet into the room within, and tried to leap down inside with Timothy's ease. I landed upon my feet, stinging the sodden soles of them a bit, but I managed to receive a nasty scratch upon my left arm where it came into contact with a broken pane.

The interior of the room and, indeed, of the inn itself was so dark that at first I could make out nothing at all, not even the size of the room nor its contents, if there were any. And that tiresome

Timothy was gone out of sight again. I called to him, rather louder than is my habit, and in a voice that quavered entirely unlike itself. But there was no answer, only a kind of dusty echo as I imagined the sound of my voice penetrating those forsaken rooms all about me. Absurdly enough, I should have felt less lonely, less uneasy, if Timothy had remained in my charge. Where could he have got to so quickly? There were perhaps a dozen separate bedchambers somewhere in this ancient pile. And could I be absolutely sure I was the only person taking shelter here at this moment?

There was just enough of that soft mauve radiance of the heather left in the atmosphere outside so that after acquainting myself with the darkness within, I was able to make out objects such as a huge black open mouth at the south end of the room, which proved at closer quarters to be a large, very unclean old Jacobean fireplace. Vagabonds and gypsies had evidently made this their quarters at one time or another; the remnants of cooking fires and rotted objects, which I took to be food, lay scattered about in front of the fireplace. I could now make out the open doorway into a dark passage, and I crossed the room, my shoes and skirts gushing little pools of water, along with an occasional drop of blood from the scratch on my arm, which had begun to sting annoyingly now.

In the doorway, not liking the look of all that Stygian darkness, I called to Timothy again, this

time in a cross tone that left no doubt of my mood. I heard a scratching sound far down the passage, as though the kitten had understood my tone only too well and was making off for distant parts.

I listened, trying to gain some sense of his location, and by making a severe effort, I managed to eliminate first the rumble of thunder and then the sound of the pelting rain against the windows. By tucking that sound back into my mind and ignoring it, I began to sense the other sounds within the old house—the creak of timbers in a room not far from me and the faint swing of an open door somewhere upstairs. But even more oppressive was the smell of must and age and staleness. I wrinkled my nose at it; yet it was this very scent, coming to me in little gusts, sometimes elusive, sometimes excessively strong, which first made me aware of the sound over my head in some dark, forgotten room.

Hardly louder than the scramble of Timothy's paws as he had turned in panic and reversed his speed a moment ago, there was now another noise, the faint tap-tap-tap, as if someone were knocking on the wall or the bare flagstone floor. So I was not alone in this deserted old inn!

I wondered what I should do. Good sense and good manners required me to go up to whatever room this person occupied and make myself known, perhaps apologizing for the intrusion. But I felt the most cowardly reluctance to do so.

Not the least addition to my discomfort was the sogginess of my clothing, which clung damply to my shivering flesh and made little gurgling sounds in my slippers with every step I took. I had only recently begun to wear my hair properly pinned and skewered with bodkins, and the loose wisp of curl I had so painstakingly put in at one side of my brow this morning with a crimping iron was now mere soaking straight feathers that slashed coldly across my cheeks.

Surely, I should present a repulsive picture to whoever was abovestairs. This, at least, was my excuse—for I confess I did not above half-like the notion of wandering along that dark, musty passage and then feeling about for the staircase, all the while under the eyes of whatever night creatures crept out of the walls to watch my going.

I heard Timothy scramble around at the end of the passage as though startled, and I sympathized with him heartily. But since he appeared to be so close, I knew I must follow and take him up or my whole wretched expedition would be useless.

"Timmy-boy," I called, sternly squaring my shoulders for the task, which made chill little trickles of water snake their way down my neck and back. I took several tentative steps along the passage, noticing that the storm outside had subsided and dusty little shafts of lilac-colored light ventured into the room I had quitted.

This faintest of illuminations enabled me to

make out varying pools of darkness on the floors and walls and the far end of the passage with, I thought, a staircase behind it. Against the thicker black of the staircase I made out something shadowy, vague as yet, but—surely—approaching me. It seemed to be floating along the passage, so that I fancied pale garments and a dreadful pallor where the face should be, and two burning eyes and streaks of darkness like saber slashes across that oval face—if face it was.

I paused, trembling as I had not trembled since childhood and barely resisting the impulse to scream. What should I say to this half-seen creature who stared at me now, pausing as I did, mouth open . . . ?

And then, of course, I knew and was furious at my own stupidity. This was what came of imagining things about a harmless old house abandoned and forlorn. At the further end of the passage, hung against the side of the staircase, was a full-length looking glass, and the strange, floating creature was I, with damp clothes, wet hair, the natural healthy color of my face chilled to milky white with the cold. I laughed at my idiotic fears and had the pleasure of catching Timothy by that cheerful sound. He came racing down the passage as though he too had seen a ghost—a more durable one than my own. He scooted between my feet and then, thinking better of that spurned haven, crawled back and pawed at my sodden skirts as a hint to be taken up.

Again, as I picked up the little cat, I heard the peculiar tap-tap somewhere over my head. Timothy did not help matters by so obligingly accepting and improving on each of my emotions. He was curled up in my arms, but his head with the sensitive pointed ears and the gray-green eyes tilted up, and like me he stared at the age-blackened timbers that formed the ceiling of this room.

"Just raindrops falling through a break in the roof, most likely," I murmured to Timothy, but I don't think he believed me any more than I did. He fretted and meowed very softly but made no attempt to escape from my arms. He was definitely disturbed by whatever was abovestairs.

Disgusted with my own absurd attack of nerves, which was so very unlike me, I walked deliberately down the ground-floor passage toward the tall looking glass and the staircase beyond it. If I did meet anyone who properly belonged at Hag's Head, I wanted to make my excuses and explain my presence. It was amazing how much braver I felt, armed with my explanation and prepared to use it. The tapping sound died away as I approached the broad flight of stairs carved of a dark wood that had once been highly polished and beautiful but was now frightfully dingy, wasted in such a forsaken place.

I began to smell the disquieting odor of burned wood and cloth. It was very dark in this entrance passage, but the broken glass and shutters of a front window cast streaks of light upon the lower

half of the staircase. The upper half was dark as a starless midnight. No matter how shadowy the passage, the upper staircase, and the taproom to my left with its rich taprail thick with dust, I could plainly see that no fire had touched this area. Why, then, should that acrid smell of smoke and burning leap to my senses in this area of the ancient public house?

Timothy's small pink nose was troubled too. He wrinkled it several times and roused himself to get a better look at his surroundings, about which he obviously began to have as much curiosity as I. I lifted him higher so he might see better, and together we started up the stairs, all the while looking as closely as possible to see where the burned timbers were, or the blackened draperies, symbols of whatever disaster had fallen upon this strange place.

The sounds outside no longer intruded upon this part of the inn, which was locked in deep silence. Even in what I supposed were the ancient bedchambers above me on the first floor, the tap-tap had ceased. Perhaps my steps on the stairs had been heard and someone was afraid of us, the unknown intruders, as Timothy and I had been afraid of that tap-tapping sound a while ago.

As I moved up the stairs, the strong odor of burned wood and cloth seemed to fade. Wherever the fire had been, it did not appear to have damaged the upper floors. I remember how deadly silent it was there for a moment on the staircase just

before a voice called to me from somewhere in the dark passage on the ground floor. It was a masculine voice that shook me by its unexpectedness, as well as its curt, crisp authority.

"What the devil are you doing in here?"

CHAPTER TWO

I HAD BEEN caught halfway up the stairs when the curious question reached me. Anyone but a fool would have known what I was doing here in this weather. Once I knew the voice was corporeal and not phantom, I put on anger as a salve to my secret embarrassment.

"I was looking for my kitten. He ran out in the rain. That is what I am doing here—sir!"

Looking down into the shadowy room below me, I made out a tall man with darkish, glowering features not entirely in keeping with his aristocratic voice.

"Well then," said he, "you plainly have found the little beast; so now you may be on your way." And as I hesitated, he added, "Or would you prefer wandering about in a house which is not your own?"

I hadn't been treated with such adult contempt since I was twelve, and I resented it exceedingly. But I hesitated no longer. I began to back downstairs until I realized how ridiculous he had made me appear, at which time I turned around and sedately descended the last two steps. Just as I felt I

was retreating with the honors of war, despite my drenched appearance, Timothy took a violent dislike either to all this shouting between the well-spoken ruffian and me or to the pervasive odor on the ground floor. He squirmed more than usual and leaped gracefully out of my arms, streaking down and behind the stairs, into the darkness somewhere below.

"Timmy, you rascal! Come back here!" I started after him, only to have one of my wrists firmly seized by the man in the darkness behind me.

"Never mind the beast—I'll attend to it. And stay where you are or you may fall through the flooring hereabouts."

Desperate to retrieve some measure of my normal self-confidence, I thought on the spur of the moment of an excuse that would explain my presence here. This should place me on an equality with one of these avaricious country squires, or farmers, or whatever he might be. My handsome, scowling Yorkshireman might be any of these things, or even a vagabond and himself intruding!

"Sir, if you will let me explain, I may buy this—"

"I can imagine! And how does a child your age plan to purchase? No matter. Come down now, like a good lass. You won't like the cellar beneath either if you go through, I'll warrant."

I took this to mean that the building and the staircase were rotting away, which rather put a period to my planned excuse that I would purchase the inn, although I should dearly have loved to

make just that gesture. Anything, in fact, to spite the detestable man!

"Timmy!" I called again as I yielded with as much grace as I could muster before him. How right Mama had been when she told me never to cross a Yorkshireman! But truly, it was an unusual experience for me, for I was well used to having my way at home and among my Cornish relations. I found this an extraordinary sensation.

I began to make out more plainly the form and features of this Yorkshireman by the mauve light through the windows of the taproom. There was no mistaking his determined expression or that he had the strength to carry out his intentions. I might have stood firm to him and not have hesitated, had he been any of the Cornishmen of my acquaintance. But I was forced to admit that he might be so brutish as to strike me if I refused obedience, and beside all else, he clearly knew more of this house than I. Not to mention Timothy, my fellow criminal.

On the other hand, there was the fierce weather outside on the heath. Would he actually set me abroad upon that running sea of rain?

"What are you about now?" said the surly Yorkshireman.

"It is still raining . . . sir," I said between my teeth.

He glanced over my head through the broken, twisted shutters where it was perfectly clear that the rain was pelting down exactly as I had said,

but it didn't seem to shake his determination in the least.

I was worried about poor Timothy, and but for him I would have been most happy to remove from this wretched house, where we were clearly unwanted. I said as much to our shadowy enemy, who, I was gradually coming to believe, was the master of the Hag's Head Inn. I did not envy him the weird old place with its upper floors haunted by a tap-tapping sound and its taproom smelling of burned timber and cloth.

"No matter," he said. "I see you are in the right. It is a trifle wet out. It will blow over in a few minutes. You had better go into the common room and wait. I'll get your precious cat."

He started into the dark behind the staircase, moving lightly and carefully. I heard no betraying creak or give in the wooden stairs as he moved. While I waited in the open taproom, watching him dissolve into the blackness of unknown regions, I realized that I preferred his company to his absence, detestable as that company might be. The old Hag's Head held a fascination for me, but it also aroused a very real uneasiness that I laid partly to the sounds and smells I had noticed and partly to the curious reactions of both Timothy and the Yorkshireman, two males who, in their different ways, demonstrated only too clearly that something was not right about the Hag's Head besides its age and disuse.

Outside, I heard the rain slacken to a dripping,

pervasive wetness over the land. I looked out and saw again the lovely mauve patina that made the endless rills and becks and burns look soft as the green moss in dells I remembered from my childhood.

Just as I was beginning to think the queer old house had swallowed up the cross and arrogant Yorkshireman, not to mention my tawny adventurer, Timothy, the man appeared again. I was more than relieved to see that he had Timothy in one hand. He held out the kitten to me as though it were a ball of fur curled in one of his hands, and to my surprise, Timothy seemed perfectly comfortable, welcoming this treatment. Or was he merely anxious to get out of this place and therefore allowing inhospitable ruffian to handle him thus?

"Now that you've had your fill of the house, I trust you've also satisfied yourself on the matter of the reputed ghost—or is it ghosts?" the Yorkshireman said, showing some slight glint of humor for the first time.

"There'll be no self-respecting ghost here. You're not frightening me, sir," I told him, taking Timothy against me and then feeling slightly hurt at the kitten's instinctive rejection of my damp bosom.

The man took my elbow and almost forcibly walked me through the ground-floor passage along the way I had come. Through bars of heather-colored light and shadow I made out his features,

handsome in a harsh, high-boned way, with a healthy olive pallor that accentuated deep-set dark eyes, black hair, and a strong mouth that was surprisingly sensuous in such an uncompromising face. To judge by his garments, from the topboots to the well-fitted jacket, he might be an aristocrat, but his abrupt manner was so ill natured that I set him down for a local sheep farmer grown above himself. But that he was rather more handsome in some ways, and less passionate in manner, I would have known him exactly for one of the "fierce Yorkshiremen" Mama had warned me about.

"Doubtless you're an outlander from London or some such trumpery place," he remarked, to my secret amusement. "Ever since the talk of haunts and guytrashes, they come from all quarters to lose themselves on the open moors. And that despite the warnings." He looked at me with eyes as dark as the York sky had been a few minutes before. "You'll likely have seen the posted warning as you stepped out onto the open moor; did you not?"

Since I had been busy watching the ground and trying to follow Timothy's tracks, I obviously hadn't seen his precious signs.

"No, sir. That I did not," I said, mincing no words in explanation.

He raised his eyebrows, taking leave to doubt me.

"Come, girl, you fancied an encounter with the ghosts at Hag's Head, and there's the truth of it."

Since he looked disagreeably sure of himself, I

was happy to remind him, "Well, then, if it's not ghosts that make a tap-tapping sound in those chambers abovestairs, you have fooled Timothy and me."

As I had expected, he dismissed this with casual contempt, but there was an attentiveness in his manner, a sudden stillness about him.

"Rubbishing business altogether. For more than ten years local busybodies have fancied candlelights and sounds and other marks of ghostly favor here, but I assure you, Hag's Head has been combed from bedchambers to cellars. The only creatures who inhabit it are spiders and rodents."

He still had not explained the curious tap-tapping, which was hardly the work of spiders, and all his scorn of ghostly phenomena merely reinforced my belief that it had not been my imagination—or Timothy's. The oddness of this house was apparently well-known to the moorland people.

When we reached the parlor through which Timothy and I had made our unorthodox entrance, it was exactly like this impossible man to fix his attention on the broken glass rather than on our effort to escape from a bad drenching.

"I thought as much. You're a trespasser beside all else. Do you know you could be remanded for this, my girl? I've a very good notion to take you in hand before the local magistrate."

It was just the sort of odious thing the nasty creature would think of, and if that happened, not

only would Mrs. Sedley be disgraced for having taken me in, but I should never be able to purchase anything remotely suitable to a girls' school in this area after such a shocking black mark upon my character. With a tremendous effort, I managed to subdue my natural high temper and spirit of defiance.

"Sir, you would not, surely! We haven't laid hands upon anyone's property. In point of fact, sir, we are just leaving. Come, Timothy. . . ."

Clutching the kitten, though I could already feel its dissenting vote, I went to the broken window through which I had entered. I looked out cautiously, getting a mouthful of water from the eaves for my trouble. Behind me, I heard the footstep of the Yorkshireman, and Timothy was neatly wrested from my grasp.

"I'll take the kitten to the village myself. There is no need in his suffering for your stubbornness. I would suggest we all leave by the scullery door, but I can see you prefer the window."

Realizing that all his nastiness had been mere fustian and that he was teasing me with his own peculiar form of humor, I longed to keep on climbing out the window; for I was caught by this last remark of his just as I had one knee raised and, in a most unladylike way, was ready to climb out. I hesitated just long enough, debating, to find Timothy back in my arms and both of us in one damp bundle. Then I was lifted back from the window and onto my own two feet again.

"Come," said the man.

I had the wisdom to obey him. Walking along beside him into more mysterious regions that I rightly took to be the abandoned kitchen and servants' quarters, I felt like a scolded child. Furthermore, I was terribly conscious of my sopping, clinging dress, which seemed frozen to my spine, and my nearly new morocco slippers, which were waterlogged and going slup-slup as I pattered along trying to keep up with him. It didn't make me feel more grown-up to know that even though my companion did not laugh aloud, he was vastly amused at me and my plight and also, I suspected, at my being forced to yield to his wishes.

Take me before the magistrate, indeed! What a fool I had been to believe that! I supposed he had also been joking when he spoke of the ghosts that the moorland people had seen at the Hag's Head.

It occurred to me that I might distract his attention from my disreputable appearance and at the same time find an explanation for the odd sounds in the Hag's Head that had so puzzled Timmy and me. It would do me no harm and might even impress this superior creature with my adult qualities if I prefaced my questions with the businesslike statement, "Should I find something suitable, I may purchase a disused building in the area."

"Really? One would not have suspected it." This comment was as bad as his first upon my ability to conduct such dealings. He looked me over, and

I began to wish I had used some other opening gambit. I could only hope he saw beneath my soggy surface to the competent, grown-up Kathleen Bodmun I knew myself to be. He did not, though. "Now, what'll a leggy lass like yourself be doing with that many guineas?" Before I could think of something sufficiently hateful to say to this, he added, "The Hag's Head is no place for children."

He could not possibly mean me. He must be referring to the schoolgirls who might attend my academy for young ladies. Nevertheless, instinctively, I glanced up overhead. We were in the kitchen now, and the high, smoke-blackened ceiling looked as normal as Mama's Cornish cooking house. It was easy, in the circumstances, to dismiss those "haunts" with the contempt they deserved.

"I am not a child, sir, to be set afraid by your silly talk of ghosts. I don't believe there are any!"

"What a brave wrench it is!" was all the satisfaction I got—that and a smile that would have softened a woman less hardened against him. Besides, the smile had been at my expense. "Whether there are or are not ghosts has nothing to do with the evil of this place. The very walls are pervaded with it. I don't want to see you here again."

As if there was any likelihood of that! What an impossible man!

I was surprised to notice how late it was when we came out of doors behind the inn. The heathery

glow encompassed the moorland world, thanks to the storm, which had passed over, taking sunset with it.

"Mount up before me," the Yorkshireman commanded as he led a skittish mare around from one of the outbuildings and swung easily into the saddle. He extended his hand to me, and I, with Timothy to think of, could do nothing but obey. After all, I didn't want the poor kitten wandering about the moor all night so far from his warm hearth in Maidenmoor village.

I found it difficult to mount, in the circumstances, and was almost afraid to accept the Yorkshireman's hand up. But he lifted me with such ease that I felt I might have underestimated him.

There was no doubt of it. I found the ride from the moorland heights back to the village infinitely more pleasant than my earlier pursuit of Timothy across endless sheep tracks, through gorse and heather and the fury of the autumn storm. Yet I could not but regret, now we were safely away, that I had not made a more careful examination of the Hag's Head Inn, especially in those upper quarters which had so puzzled me.

"Where are you lodged?" demanded the Yorkshireman, squeezing me uncomfortably between his two arms as he jogged the reins.

"At Mrs. Sedley's. She is an old school friend of Mama's."

"I should not have thought it possible," he murmured, with that detestable note of amusement

which I resented so much. "Only to think of Clara Sedley absorbing any form of genuine culture beggars the imagination."

"She is a very knowledgeable lady," I said, taking up the cudgel for my sponsor. "There is not a person in the village who does not come in the way of her house for information, sir."

"You may call me Nicholas," said the Yorkshireman. "I don't doubt in the least that the villagers seek out Clara," he added. "She is an incorrigible gossip."

"That is a lie—an untruth if ever I heard one, Master Nicholas. Mama is no gossip, and she sent me to Mrs. Sedley."

"What has your mama to do with anything? I have known Clara since time out of mind, and if you have any secrets, I warrant she'll have them off your tongue before the night is out." He stopped speaking, and I thought he had done with his ungallant comments, but he added presently as the mare trotted along a sheep track high up behind the village, "Yet, though she knows every secret in Maidenmoor, she is careful never to divulge her own."

That was odd. But upon thinking it over, I decided Master Nicholas was merely venting some personal spite upon my crippled hostess.

He looked down at me, smiling. "Poor child. Life is full of troubling facts. I have merely given you a few before you were ready. In the end, you will thank me."

"I doubt it!" I said, shivering as the first breeze of evening struck my wet garments.

Master Nicholas surprised me by drawing Timmy and me back closer to his body, where Timmy meowed plaintively but I was much warmer. When I started with embarrassment, not knowing what to expect and stiffening against some impending liberty, he quickly set my fears at rest, while deflating any pretensions I might have.

"Your arms were freezing. Now behave. Do you want to fall? You were a fool not to bring a wrap today. Do you know nothing at all of the moors?"

To cover my embarrassment at having suspected him of attempting my virtue—an absurd idea, it seemed—I said quickly, "Speaking of the cold, there was a fire in the Hag's Head at one time, wasn't there? Yet it doesn't show. Nothing is burned."

The muscles of his arms seemed suddenly harder than I had previously noticed. It would have been awkward to try to look up into his face; yet I knew that quite a different mood was upon him.

"The fire was confined to the cellars and the heather outside. The good York stone of the ground floor saved the rest of the house."

I sensed that there was more to the fire than he had told me. "Was this very recently?" I asked.

"Some twelve years gone. Here we are at the village. By daylight you may see the warnings

posted on the edge of Heatherton Moor. Next time, heed them."

He was undoubtedly right in a general way, but I had been on an errand of mercy, the rescue of Timothy, and regarded myself as excluded from his stern prohibition.

"Set me down at Sedley House, please. It's just this side of the parish graveyard."

"How singularly appropriate!" remarked Master Nicholas sardonically.

I pretended not to hear this.

As he set me down, rousing the sleeping Timothy in my arms, I stopped a moment, still pursuing that curious mystery of the old Hag's Head. "There really was something abovestairs at that old inn today," I said. "I heard it. So did the kitten."

The dark, dour look came over his face again. Even the glow from the lamp in Mrs. Sedley's upstairs sitting room failed to illuminate the darkness in those deep-set eyes of his. He was somehow involved in the mystery of the old Hag's Head, and his connection with it troubled, or perhaps just tantalized me.

"You heard nothing but the rain," he said coldly. Then, seeing that I was not convinced, he added, "And the rats, perhaps. Very probably, you heard the rats. At any rate, there has been nothing human in that tavern for twelve years, except foolish visitors like yourself. And they usually end

by telling fanciful tales, just as you will, I'm sure."

"They are not fanciful!" I contradicted furiously. "And you may as well know I don't believe you." I saw his eyes flash with anger, but I had begun and had to finish. "Did something happen there? Why do people think ghosts hang about?"

"Stand away from the mare. She is skittish and the kitten frightens her."

I moved away abruptly, turning my back and starting into the cozy, candlelit little entrance hall of Sedley House. I was surprised but somehow relieved when he called to me, "Wait."

I looked back, saying stiffly, "I beg your pardon. I did not know it concerned you."

"What do you mean—concerned me? What have you heard?"

Startled at his tone, which was unexpectedly tense, I said hastily, "Nothing, sir. Good night, and—thank you."

Whether he acknowledged this or not, I couldn't hear. The mare started off at a gallop, and they were gone in the dark.

A shadow slowly crossed in front of the lamp in Mrs. Sedley's sitting room upstairs, and I looked up, wondering. It was extremely difficult for her to move about without the help of her servants, but she had apparently been so interested in the dialogue between Master Nicholas and me that she had reached over from her chair and pushed open the casement. I began to suspect that in one point, at least, the Yorkshireman had been right.

I looked up and waved to her, but she withdrew her head with a quick movement and closed the windows, pretending she had not seen me.

Timothy was meowing for his supper with lung power that would have done justice to a creature three times his size, and I would have been strongly tempted to do the same, but for my last words with Master Nicholas. I was disturbed, because when I had pried into matters that did not concern me, I felt myself at fault, a rare and unattractive experience. I was not given to much penitence for mistaken acts or judgments. In the general way, my mistakes during my eighteen years had had a way of turning out well. Perhaps I had merely been lucky thus far.

Meg Markham, Mrs. Sedley's flaxen-haired maidservant, met me outside the ground-floor parlor. She reached for Timothy, who suddenly betrayed a touching anxiety not to be separated from me, and we were forced to pry each of his claws from the muslin of my ruined dress.

"Go along, Miss," the girl said in her friendly way. "I'll see to the beastie. Missus is that anxious to speak with you, you've no notion! She spied you talking with Sir Nicholas. He's the magistrate in this riding."

So my surly rescuer was a knight and a judge! That gave him his airs of command, no doubt. Well, he should not impose his airs upon me! Nor his sly jokes about bringing me before the magistrate—himself!

"I'll bring your tea things to Mrs. Sedley's sitting room, Miss."

"Thank you. First, I must change. I've got soaking wet today."

"Kathleen!" Mrs. Sedley called from upstairs. "Do come and sit by me; there's a dear. And tell me whatever you were doing with my Elspeth's betrothed."

Surprised, I looked at Meg Markham, who nodded. I had not yet met Mrs. Sedley's granddaughter, Elspeth, but legends of the girl's slumberous beauty had preceded her. Mama was forever receiving letters from Mrs. Sedley extolling the good looks of the winsome Elspeth, and one such letter had included a miniature of her. All this had aroused in me an aversion to the poor beauty before ever I met her.

Small wonder the most important man in the West Riding, the magistrate, Sir Nicholas Somebody-or-Other, had fallen in love with Elspeth Sedley. But I thought with some surprise that he did seem fifteen or more years the senior of his seventeen-year-old future bride. I did not envy either of them the prospect of sharing a life or even a household. As for myself, I had long ago determined, after reading a prodigious number of romances, never to marry any man my senior by more than a year or two, no matter how much pressure my parents brought to bear. In point of fact, I could not quite see Mama or Father forcing me to

do any such thing. I could really afford to pity the beauteous Elspeth—but somehow I did not.

For a few minutes these amusing thoughts almost took my mind off the haunting of the Hag's Head Inn. Then I went up to change and to find out why Mrs. Sedley was so curious about the subject of my farewell conversation with Sir Nicholas.

CHAPTER THREE

"DEAR KATHLEEN, do come and sit with me. Here," said Mrs. Sedley, who looked round and pink and glowing over her steaming-hot tea as she indicated the uncushioned stool beside her.

Obediently, I took the stool, feeling much improved in a comfortable and dry gown, which was a trifle faded from many washings and whose skirts were too full for the current mode I had spied in London. But the gown had always put me in very good looks. This was important, since I was in momentary expectation of meeting that paragon of loveliness Elspeth Sedley.

Clara Sedley was almost excessively conscious of her modernity and was dressed up to the very latest mode. Not for her the dear, old-fashioned look of my own Mama, who still wore the many petticoats and wide skirts of her girlhood, along with a new fichu each day. When I had hugged her when I was a child, I had loved the clean, crisp scent of those fichus against my nose. Of late, I had shot up to Mama's height, but the fichus were as fresh as ever and as well loved. For all their outward appearance, my parents might never have known the great revolutionary upheaval that had

swept Continental Europe during their lifetime. I marveled at their detachment from the present and was even more surprised at it when I journeyed to Yorkshire, for everywhere I saw the developements of a wondrous new century, but I still loved the old eighteenth-century ways of my parents. I had always found them conformable to my ideas and conduct, and it was a shocking thing, indeed, to come up against a creature like Sir Nicholas who disputed me so abominably.

"Now, do tell, my dear." Mrs. Sedley fanned herself vigorously and leaned a little nearer to me.

I withdrew from her mentally, but I hoped she could not see my revulsion at her eagerness.

"You mean about you and Mama? She often speaks of her years with you at Mrs. Pendecort's Academy and of the time you wore Mama's Sunday gown and bonnet so you might play that trick upon the young man who professed to favor you both. It was such a funny—"

"No. No, child." Her tight curled white head shook impatiently. "About dear Nicholas. Do tell about dear Nicky."

I was aghast and could scarcely believe I had heard her correctly.

"Nicky! Good God, ma'am! Don't be telling me you call that black, forbidding creature—Nicky?"

She watched me take my teacup in my palms and wince at the heat of it, and she smiled.

"You will become used to our North Country in time, but meanwhile, you had best take to our

local customs. Are you not used to hot tea—even to the point of scalding? Your Mama told me it was a custom even among Cornishmen."

I saw her tiny eyes like sparkling glass peering at me out of her plump face, and for some reason absolutely incomprehensible to me, I felt a cold chill, lost my trend of thought, and hastily warmed myself with another sip of her strong tea.

"Yes, of course," I replied vaguely, hoping she would ignore my confusion. "I mean to say—"

"You have not confided your little secret to me, my dear," she said in her sugary voice. "Where did you encounter the dear boy? And how long have you known him?"

"If you refer to the justice of the peace of this riding, ma'am, he came to my rescue on the moor and carried your kitten and me to the village."

"Ah!" She seemed relieved. I wondered if it was possible she feared I would throw my cap at Sir Nicholas under her granddaughter's pretty nose. She went on, however, "A charming man. We are forever seeing him at our hearth, for you must know my dear, he dotes upon my granddaughter, Elspeth. Simply dotes!"

I could recall no signs of this in Sir Nicholas's manner, but I did not say so.

Mrs. Sedley went on confidentially, "If I can but bring Elspeth up to the mark, I am in daily expectation of his making a formal declaration of his intentions. But sweet Elspeth is just a trifle dif-

ficult. Talks of age differences and other bits of nonsense. However, she will come around."

I could not mention what I privately thought, that Elspeth might be more serious about the age difference than her grandmother supposed. I could not imagine a union of any lasting happiness between the sharp, sardonic cynicism of Sir Nicholas and the innocence and lack of experience possessed by Elspeth Sedley; so I ventured merely, "Mama says Miss Elspeth is very young, whereas it is my impression that Sir Nicholas—" My voice wavered indefinitely. I hoped she would not make me go on, for I had been foolish to utter any such sentiments about a matter that did not concern me.

"Such a sweet creature, to be sure!" said Mrs. Sedley.

"Sir Nicholas?" I asked incredulously.

"Heavens, no! My granddaughter. And small wonder. All other females pale beside my Elspeth. Even you—pardon me, my dear; you are well enough in your way. A fine figure of a lass. But my granddaughter is a beauty. I thought her mother was lovely. My son's wife. But she had a stubborn streak. A bad thing, that, my dear. I believe in being modern. I think I may be said to be the glass of fashion when I entertain, for example. But young ladies are the better for a strong rein."

I assumed this to mean that she wielded the strong rein. I began to think that a marriage between Sir Nicholas and young Elspeth was not so

impossible after all. He was just the sort of man, as Mrs. Sedley probably knew, who prefers his women simpering and passive.

But I was torn between resentment and amusement at Mrs. Sedley's setdown of whatever pretension to good looks I might have had, and I took leave to doubt her assertion that I would dote on the fair beauty. But I merely smiled. I could be submissive too, if necessary, but only on the surface.

"Elspeth is said to resemble me in my younger days," said Mrs. Sedley complacently.

I obliged with the correct sentiments. I was less inclined to agree, however, when Mrs. Sedley mentioned what a splendid prize it would be to capture the darkly handsome aristocrat, adding, "I am persuaded he is not the least high in the instep, for all his fortune."

If he was anything, I thought, the man I had met in the darkness of the Hag's Head Inn was "high in the instep" with me. But, I supposed, a man with a fortune might always be said to be pleasant, no matter what fiend's temper he possessed.

I began to think that I should learn nothing more about my hectic adventure on the moor and that if I ever wished to pursue the matter of the Hag's Head Inn, I would do well to behave more obligingly to Sir Nicholas himself.

"Perhaps I should buy the stupid place myself, and then the mystery of it must be told me," I murmured, beginning to consider how much would be

asked for the wretched place with its blackened heather, burned cellars, and unseen inhabitants who went tap-tapping along the upper walls. It occurred to me that if the inn had a reasonable assortment of bedchambers upstairs, and if the ghosts who produced the tapping would kindly desist, I might even become serious about purchasing it; for it was bound to be exceedingly cheap, and I was looking for a bargain.

Mrs. Sedley sipped the steaming tea, and her eyes gleamed over the rim of the cup.

"What can you be talking about, child? Have you found a school to purchase upon the very first day of your visit? What a busy girl you are, to be sure! My Elspeth must learn from you to be more aggressive, as befits a modern girl. She is so very feminine, you know."

I cringed inside at this backhanded slap at my "aggressiveness" and lack of femininity, but I tried not to let her guess she had struck home, for I had begun to suspect she was one of those tireless women who keep searching for the vulnerable spot wherein to jab their needles.

"It was quite by accident, ma'am. When Timothy scampered so far over the heath, we were caught by that cloudburst and had to climb into an old building, where we met Sir Nicholas."

"Dear me, I cannot imagine what Sir Nicholas would be doing in a place like that." Her fluttery manner seemed to invade the air around me. Her plump upper body and even her fingers, knotted

at the joints with their painful swelling, were busy with little movements. "But do go on. You spent some time with Dear Nicholas, I take it. I feel sure you are much too intelligent to bore him. A tiny hint to you on that score, my dear. You will forgive me for my advice, since your mother looks to me to guide you during your stay. . . . Nicholas has a great fancy to the sweet, modest fashion in young girls. No opinions. No putting oneself forward. Of all things, that is the most odious to him, I feel certain. He cannot abide directness or one of those straight—almost too candid—looks of yours, lovely as those eyes may be. I tell you this in the hope of guiding you in your dealings with the Opposite Sex, a mysterious animal, my dear, as you will find. Your mother understands this sort of thing very well. She would tell you, as I do, to stay away from Nicholas, for your own good. But you were saying—you took shelter in a cottage with Nicholas Everett."

She was right about the dour and dark Sir Nicholas. Anyone could see he had detested me from the first moment. But I fully returned his opinion. I could not like those overbearing, positively medieval males who refused to acknowledge any common humanity in a woman.

"No, ma'am. I was saying I took shelter in an old *house,* which appeared to be haunted, and where—"

Everything about Mrs. Sedley might be said to have suddenly ceased. She sat there perfectly still,

staring, not at me, but at her knotted hands. I found this curious change in her far more upsetting than her overactive attempts to show me that she was every shred as feminine and ruffled as her beautiful granddaughter.

I could not understand why she had seemed to take me in dislike so oddly after my adventure today. Months ago, it had been her insistent suggestion that Mama and Father send me to Maidenmoor to find an inexpensive situation for our projected young ladies' academy, which in due time Miss Higsby, my former governess, was to superintend. What had brought about this curious reversal in Mrs. Sedley's attitude toward me?

Yet now, in her sudden stillness, I felt for the first time since I had returned with Sir Nicholas that she was as sincere as she had been upon my arrival this morning. I wondered why.

"In any case," I began again, a little hesitantly, "I thought it just possibly might suit. That is, if it's inexpensive. You know, truly a bargain. It's a bit remote, perhaps, but that's all to the good. For the sake of the young ladies, I mean."

Mrs. Sedley dabbed a laced-edged handkerchief at her pursed and colorless lips. It was odd that I had not noticed before how very much older she was than Mama. It was hard to believe they had been in school together. Mama had not been young when I was born, but she had always seemed young to me.

"For the sake of the—yes. Quite so. Where is this . . . building?"

"I don't even know if it may be for sale. I thought at first Sir Nicholas was the owner, he behaved so oddly. But I think he just naturally likes to interfere."

She frowned as she rubbed her fingers, and I guessed they gave her pain. "Surely, child," she said, "you cannot desire to purchase for delicate young ladies a building remote from civilization and inhabited by ghosts. It was ghosts, I think you said?"

Although her objections were uttered sharply and to the point, for some reason I had a notion, perhaps from the curious gleam of interest in her eyes, that she would not be sorry if I did buy this "remote building."

"Oh, I don't believe in ghosts. It was just some ridiculous sound. Mice, or—or rain. Anyway, that was what Sir Nicholas said." I sat back and sipped the strong tea. I was beginning to grow used to it. As for Mrs. Sedley, she sat rubbing her fingers and wincing. It made me decidedly nervous. Hoping to terminate this self-torture of hers, I added, "It's so ramshackle that I should think the owners would be happy to sell at any price, but I daresay they would play the highwaymen once they saw me. It's my age, I'm afraid. They wouldn't have the least notion whether I am competent or a mere bungling schoolgirl."

"I feel sure you are wrong, dear. The Hag's Head

has been for sale these eleven years and more. Very cheaply."

This was what came of my own silly boasting, for the simple reason that I had not suspected there was any likelihood of owning the Hag's Head, and now it looked as though I might find my absurd offer taken up. I must stop Mrs. Sedley from saying anything further. Word of my offer would go all over the village, and in no time the owner might be hounding me. I evaded this by rather cowardly means.

"I'm afraid the owners would never sell to me, because of my age. You see, no one in Yorkshire knows whether I have any capabilities at all, except you."

"Precisely. But Kathleen, dear child, the owner of the Hag's Head Inn is myself."

I dropped my teaspoon with a dreadful clatter, smiling weakly under her gaze.

"How . . . fortunate! Has it been in your family for long?" An inane question, in the circumstances, but I had never felt so tonguetied, and this question gave me a moment to recover.

"In a manner of speaking. It has stood a long time, let us say. It was once the most important posting house between Heatherton and Maidenmoor." She took a sip of tea, then murmured with distaste, "Cold. Stone cold! Where is that tiresome girl? Meg!"

Seizing the chance to escape and form a reasonable way out of the dilemma I had so stupidly

blundered into, I set my own tea aside and jumped up. "I'll fetch you a fresh tray. And shall I bring more scones?"

"If you like. For yourself. Mrs. Famblechook does a very tolerable scone."

"Tolerable! Oh, yes. Delicious." They were even better than Mama's currant scones. I would not at all object to having another.

"Meg!" Mrs. Sedley called, raising her voice to a degree surprising in such a sugary, pink-cheeked woman.

The obliging Meg bellowed back, "Ay, mum! More tea. And scones for young Miss?"

"Ay," I shouted, forgetting my governess' careful teaching, and returned to my stool, thinking furiously.

Mrs. Sedley seemed once more to be the bubbling creature I had known this morning upon my arrival.

"Now then, it was at the Hag's Head that you met Nicky."

For some odd reason that I did not care to pursue, the idea of referring to Sir Nicholas Everett as "Nicky" made me wince.

"He was frightfully angry. Timothy and I were prowling about, trying to dry ourselves and hearing all manner of odd noises—"

"A very common thing on the moors. You will scarcely find so much as a sheepman's coteen without its share of odd sounds. All the same, my dear, the house is solidly built, an excellent investment."

"Forgive me," I said impulsively, still puzzled that Mrs. Sedley was the Hag's Head owner. "It seems terribly interesting to me."

She smiled, but I felt that it was not the facile smile of the pretentious, fluttering, self-satisfied woman who remembered her popularity with what she called in capitals "The Opposite Sex." It was even a sad little smile, and though she made no gesture toward her hands or her lower back, I was suddenly conscious that life, to her, was a difficult project, that it was not easy for her even to sustain this smile.

"You would say, you cannot imagine my serving ale over a taprail or playing the parlormaid in that grim common room."

"I am persuaded you are joking, ma'am."

"Only a trifle. When my daughter and her husband came to me for the purchase money some sixteen years ago, I thought it highly unsuitable that a member of my family should own and actually give service in a public house. The Sedleys, it is true, were once yeomen, but always highly respectable. But Patrick persisted, and my daughter Megan yielded to keep peace in the family, as she often did. Patrick Kelleher was—is—my son-in-law and a celebrated charmer with the ladies. I expect he thought there would be rich opportunities for him among such custom as the Hag's Head would attract."

At this inopportune point Meg Markham arrived, bubbling with the consciousness of having

served her mistress upon the instant, and because I liked her, I was ashamed of my disappointment at her arrival.

"Yes, but—excuse me—Miss Elspeth is not the daughter of these two? And all this you are telling me must have been before the fire," I put in, as Meg served Mrs. Sedley more steaming tea, along with some odd white powders in a folded paper.

Mrs. Sedley impatiently brushed the powders aside. "Later. Not now. And perhaps Miss Kathleen will wish a dose. They are most efficacious when one has difficulty sleeping."

I shook my head as politely as possible, for I had no trouble sleeping after any day of sufficient activity. I noticed, though, that my mention of the fire at Hag's Head produced a decided, though furtive, interest in Meg Markham. When Mrs. Sedley did not answer me at once, but instead seemed to compose herself with sips of tea, Meg left the room, but slowly, with odd little side glances at me.

When Mrs. Sedley spoke again, I looked behind me at the open doorway and saw Meg's shadow upon the further wall of the landing of the staircase.

"Well, my dear," said Mrs. Sedley, "I do think you might have done worse in your choice of a school. There are eight bedchambers, and with two young ladies to the room—and the very nominal price of Hag's Head, Kathleen, child—you would be quite the richest young lady in these parts very shortly!"

Though she spoke lightly, I could not mistake the anxiety behind her bantering encouragement. I felt awkward and sorry, supposing that she must be in financial straits. This might also be the explanation for her letters to my mother, urging me to seek my school in Yorkshire when Cornwall had proved impractical. Perhaps she had hoped to broach the subject of the Hag's Head more slowly, with sufficient remarks upon its good qualities, and certainly no nonsense about ghosts and odd noises.

I fumbled nervously, hating myself for my objections. "Yes, but the fire. I daresay it did no harm above the cellars?"

"None—above the cellars," she said flatly, with no inflection whatever.

"That was my understanding from Sir Nicholas."

She looked up, plainly surprised.

"Did he speak of the fire?"

"No; not at all. Just that the fire caused the peculiar odor of burned wood. Have your daughter and her husband been back since the fire? Do they notice the odd . . . things about the place?" I saw that I had disturbed her again and added quickly, "I mean, if the inn were opened and aired, I'm sure they could resume business there. It just needs an inducement such as the return of the coaching post house. Something of that sort. These things are easily arranged."

In Cornwall, I knew that the importance of post houses was forever changing as certain high roads

became popular, then forsaken, then rounded the circle to popularity again. I suspected the payment of a sum of guineas into the right breeches pockets answered the matter in Cornwall, and I did not think Yorkshire was so very different.

When Mrs. Sedley did not reply immediately, I glanced at her and realized I had blundered somewhere. She was excessively pale, and her mouth twitched while she said in a kind of hoarse monotone, as if willing herself to remove all feeling from the words, "They cannot go back. Not my Megan. You see, she was murdered that night. The night Patrick set the fire and ran away."

CHAPTER FOUR

In the awful silence that followed my stupid blunder, I told myself I had known all along that there was something terribly wrong about the Hag's Head Inn and that in some strange way the mystery concerned Mrs. Sedley herself.

I opened my mouth after what seemed an age, but I felt too dreadful to think of any of the usual apologies.

She spoke before I could, and greatly to my relief. "Dear, dear, that was a dozen years ago. We must not dwell upon it. I am daily thankful for my lovely Elspeth. She is so like her Aunt Megan, but only in her good looks. I am determined she shall not make the same mistake in marriage. Elspeth's parents, my son and his wife, died very shortly after her birth, of a typhus, and Elspeth has been mine since."

"You have had many tragedies, ma'am," I murmured softly, wishing I might have been more skilled in the right words of comfort. Now, I began to understand Mama's friendship with the lady. There must have been, and must still be, many things about Mrs. Sedley that Mama found congenial. And perhaps before the tragedies

of her two children's death, she might have been less the gossip, less inclined to boast about young Elspeth, and even concerned about others than her own family.

She had recovered her volatile self though, and she felt around for her mirrored fan and fluttered it briskly, studying then her small, neat teeth in their reflection.

"What mournful thoughts! Do not refine upon them, I beg you. Candidly, child, does not there seem a resemblance between my granddaughter's countenance and mine? Only in the bone, of course. I make no claim, at my age, to more."

"I have not had the pleasure of meeting her yet, but from the miniature you sent Mama, I should say you are quite right." It was a small enough lie after the pain of my blundering questions.

"How sweet of you, dear Kathleen! You will be meeting Elspeth very shortly. She has been at the church, placing heather for the Sunday service." She seemed greatly satisfied and peered long into the mirrored fan. I did not pursue the matter of Hag's Head further that evening and hoped she would forget her notion that I should purchase the poor sad ruin with its unhappy past.

I took her tea tray below, wondering at the curious, resilient nature of human beings. Fortunate, indeed, were those who could shut away sorrows and perhaps dreams of vengeance, or cries against the injustices of God, while still, if I could believe Sir Nicholas, enjoying the spread of village gossip.

At any rate, I thought that if she was a gossip, she was an interesting one and must have her counterpart over the length and breadth of England.

In the kitchen I found Meg Markham eating an early supper at an uncovered rough wooden table and rolling her large blue eyes at me to indicate that something was wrong with the crinkly-haired little cook. I imagined it must be some personal feud between them, and I set the tea tray out of Mrs. Famblechook's way. But by one of the perversities of fate, the little woman made an exaggeratedly wide gesture in fetching over a pan. Down came the tea tray, crashing to the floor with all its fittings. Thereupon, Mrs. Famblechook turned, faced the damaged crockery amid the rivulets of tea, and put one finger to her lips, enjoining silence.

"Sh!" she commanded. "Will ye be waking the mistress now?"

The shambles on the floor very wisely made no reply, and while Mrs. Famblechook looked around for cleaning rags in a confused but happy way, as though the kitchen were a total stranger to her, I began to pick up the broken pieces of china.

I was still puzzling over the cook's odd behavior when Mrs. Sedley called down to us in a resigned voice, "Meg? What is broken?"

"Fambles has been at the bottle again!" yelled Meg at the top of her lungs, adding in extenuation, "It be but the second-best china."

"Fambles!" cried Mrs. Sedley. "Put by that Madeira and get on with your work."

"Ay, mum. Put by it is," said Mrs. Famblechook cheerfully. "Will ye favor me now, there's a love?" she went on, and as I was busy putting aside the broken china, I did not notice the direction of her remark.

"She's meanin' you, Miss," Meg informed me between bites of cold sliced beef. She herself had not raised a finger to deal with our kitchen crisis. I assumed it was a matter of caste, and as a lady's maid and a parlormaid, she could not demean herself to do a scullery maid's work.

I looked up, just in time to see Mrs. Famblechook gather up in her apron all the broken crockery I had collected and empty the apron into the fire on the open hearth with a second awful clatter.

"Ay, mum," the cook agreed with a toothy grin. "Out in stillroom there's proper fresh cream for a wee dram in the *moogin* I be baking for tomorrow. If ye'll be so good as to fetch it in, I'll just wipe up the spilled mess here."

I was relieved to get out of the kitchen, since the cook was under the influence of strong spirits, although I has seen a Cornish neighbor of ours at such times and knew the aftermath would be even worse, what with aching head and cross temper. When I went to the kitchen door, however, I saw that it opened upon a path cheek by jowl with the graveyard of the church down the steep little street.

The graveyard and the path to the stillroom were separated only by a low wall of time-darkened York stone, which I might have stepped over with ease.

There was a lamp burning near an open side door of the church beyond, and I assumed Mrs. Sedley's granddaughter, Elspeth, and her friends were still decorating the church with armfuls of late-blooming heather. It was a comforting thought, for the evening of the North Country seemed exceedingly dark to me, in spite of the first glinting rays of moonlight, and the way to the stillroom was not at all a comfortable one to follow when the queer old gravestones cast their long shadows across the path.

I was standing outside the kitchen door debating whether it was worth fetching a storm light for the short distance to the stillroom, when Mrs. Famblechook handed me a small lighted lantern and pointed out my destination at the farther end of the little fading garden of Sedley House. I thanked her and proceeded on my way, gradually discovering, however, that the darkness beyond my lantern's rays was even deeper by contrast. I covered the distance from the house to the stillroom with a speed that surprised me, reflecting all the while on the curious fact that the familiar starry or stormy Cornish night, though every bit as dark as it was here in the North, seemed so much less sinister.

I hung the lantern on the latch of the stillroom door after looking inside and spying what I im-

agined must be the small crock of cream. The little stone storage room was cold enough, I thought, to keep food fresh indefinitely. I had been almost as addled as the cook, forgetting to bring a wrap of any kind. Shivering, I pulled the cream crock off the shelf, looked into it, and, being satisfied it was what I hav been sent for, reached for the lantern. Before touching it, however, I paused. Had that sudden crunching sound, like a heavy step on the gravel path, come from Mrs. Sedley's garden?

But there was no gravel on Mrs. Sedley's side of the stone wall. On the other hand, there was a great deal of ground-up rock scattered among the gravestones. Impatient with my own imaginings, I raised the lantern high and peered out at the night scene. I was considerably relieved to see a straight path to the kitchen door unimpeded by anything more than the long, grotesque shadows of the neighboring gravestones. Clutching the lantern in one hand and the little cream crock in the other, I set my foot firmly upon the path.

A moment or two later I distinctly heard the same sound of a footstep upon the gravel close to the low stone wall, on the churchyard side, and this time I saw a form quite distinct from the gravestones rise up from behind one of the monumental crosses, as if it had been crouching there. It was a man, and as I lifted my lantern to get a look at the skulking rogue, it occurred to me that I might have surprised the sexton at his work. Per-

haps he had been digging a grave. But that was ridiculous on the face of it. No one could be up to any good hiding behind gravestones in the dark of a chill autumn night.

I could not conceive of any reason why he might intend me harm unless he was a madman, and as I considered afterward, I should have pretended I had not observed him and hurried into the house to report his antics. But instead, I raised the lantern and swung it out to illuminate the wall at my feet and the gravestone where I had caught my first glimpse of the crouching man. He was there still, springing back as if dazed at my light and putting up his arm to ward off the unexpected brightness.

"What the devil, girl! Will you blind me then? A fine end to a fruitless wait."

"Wait?" I echoed stupidly. "You'll have a long wait, sir, if you rendezvous with the inhabitants of graveyards."

He laughed, and my lantern shone upon flashing teeth in a curiously winning face that bore Irish or Scottish features, I thought. The man's sandy hair was blowing in the wind. He was not as young as he probably liked to pretend. There was a look about his eyes, the same look I had noticed in the squire's son in Cornwall, who spent all his time either ruining scullery maids or hanging about the local public houses. But attractive, yes. I gave up all notions that this man in the graveyard was either mad or a footpad.

"I'm sorry," I said. "I didn't mean to blind you, but I was startled."

He leaped nimbly over the wall and put out his hand. For an instant I thought he meant me mischief, and I barely caught myself before swinging my lantern as a weapon. I saw then that he meant to take my hand in greeting, and I was nonplussed as to how he could do that with both my hands full. He managed, however, by taking my cream crock and holding it for me.

As he took my fingers in a surprisingly warm, rather fleshy grip, I said, "It is very cold. I must go in."

"Oh, certainly, lass. I shouldn't like to make trouble between you and the old lady. What a dragon she is!"

"Sir!" I rebuked him, hoping he would let me go. I began to dislike his manner.

"Now, now, pretty love, I wish only for a small favor. Promise me?"

"I don't know. You may be a housebreaker, for all I should guess."

He laughed again, the cheerful sound of a man who has no problems his charm won't conquer. "No, truly! I am to meet the old dragon's granddaughter, Elspeth. But we must do it by stealth, thanks to precious Grandmama."

"I'm sure it's no affair of mine." Nevertheless, I did resent being party to a deception of my hostess and friend.

"Well, but—I should not like to deceive you.

You understand, it may be that . . ." He paused and gave me a winning boyish smile that very nearly fooled me into assuming he was a boy, but the merciless rays of the lantern pointed up the lines of maturity and perhaps even dissipation in his face, and I rather pitied him for his careful pretense. "It may be that Elspeth and I will need your sweet offices on our behalf." He squeezed my hand and seemed quite ready for closer familiarities, but I managed to evade him.

"I shouldn't count upon it," I told him coolly, and reached for the cream crock. "You would do better to meet Miss Sedley in the church, which is, at least, not so cold and unromantic as a graveyard."

"You crush all my pretensions. What a setdown! Well, I'll let you go because you are cold, poor child. Perhaps next time."

Because he was so absolutely without scruples and, further, made no pretense of being otherwise, I smiled with the equivocal reply, "Perhaps not."

I started along the path to Sedley House, pursued by the fellow's taunting voice. "My sweet, how am I to know your name? I can scarcely ask Elspeth."

"I suggest you do."

"Now, now; that has all the marks of a jilted woman. Come, I'll give you my name, and in exchange, you must name the female behind that lovely face."

I walked on, feeling like an addlepated milkmaid. Behind me, his voice rippled on with all the skill of the born seducer. "Promise you'll not run chattering to the old dragon?" When I made no commitment, he finished, with what I thought later was an incredible self-assurance. "Remember me, now. Patrick Kelleher, very much at your service, love."

It did not really occur to me immediately where I had heard that name before. I went into the kitchen and gave over the cream and the lantern, receiving a somewhat puzzled look from Mrs. Famblechook, who had gone on to bake her *moogin* without the wee dram requested of me, if I could judge by the delicious smells of spice, ginger, and sugar that came from the old black oven in the fireplace.

Meg Markham was replacing a book in the little bookroom off the downstairs parlor when I came through. I asked her whether Mrs. Sedley expected me to sit with her at supper.

"She's asked if you'll take supper in company of Miss Elspeth, Miss. But the young lady's latecome." Meg gave me an odd little smile and added, "Though it's my thought young Miss will be a trifling later yet."

It struck me then just who Patrick Kelleher was, and I was so shaken by the shocking knowledge, that I could scarcely prevent it from showing in my face and my voice. "Why do you say that? I saw a light in the church when I was at the still-

room. And it is scarcely two minutes' walk from here."

Meg looked as near to sly as was possible in such an open, sunny face. "But will she be coming in two minutes? Not if she's to meet a—a gentleman somewheres in betwixt there and here."

I stated upstairs to my room but paused before I reached the first landing. I leaned over the newel post, for Meg was directly beneath me, looking up.

"Do you know who that gentleman is?"

Meg beckoned to me with one finger. I came down a few steps. "There's some, like Missus, and like Sir Nicholas, him that's the justice of the peace hereabouts. . . . They think as how the gentleman's a foul wife-killer."

It seemed almost too incredible that the jolly, boyish, laughing Patrick Kelleher could have killed anyone, especially a woman. And if he was Elspeth Sedley's uncle, the business was even more unsavory. Had she no feeling for her murdered Aunt Megan?

"Why do they think he killed Megan Sedley?"

Meg's eyes widened. "By the Lord! Excusing the word, mum, you'll never be telling me you knew all along it was Patrick Kelleher!"

"Why do they think so?"

A young, low, feminine voice cut between us, sharp as a blade. "It is a lie, Meg, and you know it well! He'd never hurt Aunt Megan." Moving quietly out of the shadows of the little central hall was the lovely, slumberous-eyed Elspeth Sedley of

the miniature that Mrs. Sedley had sent Mama. I could see now exactly why Sir Nicholas and the girl's good-looking Uncle Patrick both awaited her, though probably each awaited her in a different sense.

She looked up at me, seeming to sweep her long dark lashes over me as though they were broom-straws and I a dusty carpet. "Grandmama said you had come. And someone else saw you tonight by the stillroom, hoping to spy upon me, I daresay. You must be the Cornish girl."

I was surprised by her deliberate rudeness as one is often more upset by such behavior than by wickedness.

"I have a name," I said. "All Cornish girls do. Mine is Kathleen Bodmun." Then I turned to Meg. "I'll take supper in my room. But you needn't trouble. I'll fetch it up myself."

"Yes, Miss." Meg stood aside, and I passed her on my way to the kitchen. Behind us, Elspeth called out after us, still in her throaty, sensuous young voice, "He was innocent! It is wicked to spread those lies about Uncle Patrick. I only meet him so I may solve a frightful wrong! Tell that to Grandmama when you go bearing tales about my meeting him tonight."

I carefully did not hear her, and Meg, closing the kitchen door, shut us away from her hateful accusations. I had no intention whatever of bearing tales about her to Mrs. Sedley. It was none of my affair, and it would only bring more pain to the

older woman. But I was younger than I thought and more vulnerable to childish, mistaken opinions about my nature. It took several minutes of jolly good nature by Mrs. Famblechook, along with the very first ginger cake out of the oven, before I felt my old brisk self again.

And Meg was a great help in her friendly way. "Mustn't pay no mind to Miss Elspeth. She always had a fondness for Mr. Patrick. It's like she was a wee bit jealous of her Aunt Megan when the poor lady was alive."

The smell of succulent foods had brought Timothy, Mrs. Sedley's pretty little tawny kitten, out from under the chopping table to pause at my feet, then leap with infinite grace upon my lap. He nibbled the *moogin* I fed him, carefully licking his white paws afterward. I petted his soft fur, and he purred contentedly until the palm of my hand was snagged on his small jeweled collar. The jewels were false but looked well against the copper and white of his coat. One of the jewels was missing, and where my hand had caught on the sharp, empty jewel socket, something else had caught there earlier. It was a narrow strip of lace about two inches long and badly stained with rust. The lace itself was of very fine quality, however—much finer than I was used to—and I was still examining it when Mrs. Famblechook leaned over my shoulder to see what had aroused my interest.

"There, now, Meg-girl. Come and see," she said. "It's a bad lad, so he is. Atearing of the lace off Mis-

sus' petticoat. And devilish fine quality. Where d'ye be thinking he got the blood on it? Is the poor beastie hurt then?"

I almost dropped the bit of lace at this discovery. So the stains were not rust, after all!

Meg reached over my shoulder and fingered the lace while Timothy squirmed uneasily. Her head was close over mine, and I heard her sharp intake of breath. She withdrew her hand as though it had touched fire. I looked up at her, puzzled by her extraordinary attitude.

"Missus never wears such lace, nor yet young Miss. 'Tis from one of them heathen places across the water. Like Brussels. Ay! It was from Brussels Miss Megan was used to send, to fetch such lace, and all to please Master Patrick. Where was the little cat today, Miss?"

Shaken by this revelation, I could only say, "I chased Timmy into an old house up on the moor. He may have run by some old garments lying about."

The cook and Meg looked at each other.

"The beastie went into the cellar," Mrs. Famblechook guessed.

I was astonished at this probably correct guess, spoken at hazard. "He did get away and may have gone into the cellar. Why?"

"But that's where Miss Megan was found, months after the fire. Buried in the debris. She'd been struck on the head before the fire. There was still bloodstains."

"Hush," said Meg. "If you'd not had that Madeira, you'd not talk so free."

"You mean"—I joggled poor Timothy, who meowed his protest—"Timothy found Megan Sedley's body?"

They both shuddered.

"No, Miss; no!" Meg cried quickly. "That was found more than eleven years gone. But maybe some of her lace shawl is still in the cellar."

Mrs. Famblechook nodded.

"Aye. And stained with the poor lady's very own life's blood. Fancy! After all the years. What will Sir Nicholas say? He loved her, Miss, but she married Master Patrick and lived to regret it."

"Please, never mind that." I stopped them before they went on with the harrowing details. I knew I would dream about them, in any case.

Meg shrugged. "Well then, Miss, there's no more to it. Save only . . . the haunts that folk do see of nights abovestairs at the Hag's Head."

CHAPTER FIVE

When I slept that night for the first time in the charming little guest room of Sedley House, I was quite sure I should dream of ghastly murders and of odd noises haunting my bedchamber. But the truth is, I dreamed of attending an assembly ball at Bath and of dancing down the line with two faceless gentlemen—quite an unorthodox procedure, even in a dream. I remember, though, that I was hard put to choose between them for the second set. And when I awoke to an enchanting if cloudy autumn day, I still did not recognize the faces of my two gallants. It was most puzzling.

I was out upon the cobbled street of Maidenmoor at an early hour, delighted with the brisk, misty look of the place. The surrounding moors high above us that had, for me, the feel of a thick fur collar. There were some at home that had said I should hate the North Country and never, in any circumstances, wish to establish a school in "damp, forbidding Yorkshire." Yet, had it not been for the suddenness of yesterday's storm and my pursuit of mischievous little Timothy, I should have found the Heatherton Moor a thing of beauty

even then. I liked the brisk challenge of the climate and the feeling of immensity in its space.

Before walking down through the village that bordered on its steep, narrow street, I looked behind the village, up across the limitless stretch of what the south of England called "wasteland" but which still had the last, faintly heathery glow upon it. My own West Country had such "wastes," and I loved them. They were unconquerable, or so I thought, and like some of mankind, both forbidding and challenging. How much more glorious it was to me than the soft, crowded countryside I had passed through in the York Mail Coach!

When I stood on tiptoe, I fancied I could just barely see the rooftops of the Hag's Head Inn, far away to the north and east. The inn was a haunting place to me, in several senses. I still could not believe that the innocuous gallant of the graveyard the night before had knocked his wife in the head and then set fire to the inn. And I could hardly believe that the dark, rude, handsome justice of the peace, Sir Nicholas Everett, who had so annoyed me yesterday, was still pining with love for the poor victim of that fire. He did not look like a man who pined for anything. More likely, he was a man who hated and punished. I should not like to be brought up before him in his capacity as magistrate of the countryside!

When I started down the hill that contained the single street of Maidenmoor, I nearly had a change

of heart about its severe beauty. Primitive man and the primeval nature were all very well, but I had never seen such a precipitous hill in my life and was baffled at how little the local inhabitants were impeded by that hill. All those black-clad men went clumping down to their work across the valley at the new wool mills in noisy iron pateens. And the women in black shawls were beginning to sit down to their spinning, but they peered out at me through little windowpanes that glittered in the morning light. Each house was a decided step below the one to the north of it, and as I descended the street I felt that I must constantly pause and dig my toes into the cobbles for fear of sliding the rest of the way.

There was a public house halfway down the street, the Owl of York. Even at this early hour, scarcely after dawn, it was open, with the taprail plainly in view beyond the long cold-looking passage that led in from the street. Several men and one or two women were there with steaming mugs, and the open doorway smelled of boiling rum. I could not blame them. It probably took hot rum to get them on their way up or down that hill on these brisk mornings. But it was invigorating, and I rather liked it.

I walked to the bottom of the hill and stood on the ancient stone bridge, watching the trickle of new water make its way through the rushes, carrying the debris of the summer after yesterday's flash-

ing storm. I thought of how disappointed I had been when we could find nothing suitable at home, and when not enough pupils had been interested in my school with Miss Higsby. Only after Mama complained of our local disinterest in education in an exchange of letters with Mrs. Sedley did we consider faraway Yorkshire. And now I was wondering if, perhaps, it had all been for the best.

I began to smile at my own perversity. Could it have been that odd, romantic dream last night, which had quite efficiently blurred my memory of Elspeth Sedley's insulting remarks and the earlier uneasiness over my visit to the Hag's Head Inn?

I felt the heathery, mist-scented breeze against my cheeks and turned a little, to breathe it full in the face. Greatly startled, I saw a man standing just under the further arch of the bridge, looking up at me. He was in worn hunting jacket, breeches, and boots, with a years-old sugar-loaf hat cocked jauntily on his sandy air. He had an extremely infectious grin, and although I was shocked at the ease with which a presumed murderer like Patrick Kelleher strolled about the village, I smiled back at him before I remembered.

"Ay, lass," he called to me in that lighthearted way of his, "I've said it times without number, and I'll be saying it more. For a warm bit of sheer loveliness, give me the Irish lass."

Embarrassed, I looked away, wondering how one answered such extravagant and probably

often-repeated compliments. It made me impatient when I found myself the victim of his silly, overbearing charm.

"It is rather early in the day for such manners, sir," I said coolly, hoping he would take the red of embarrassment in my face for the mere slap of the brisk, invigorating wind.

He laughed at me, not in the least rebuffed, and came out from under the bridge, climbing the bank with an amusingly boyish leap onto the road that wound beyond the bridge and over into a further valley, and then a valley after that. And always, as I remembered from my approach to Maidenmoor, it was a mere rusty thread between the wild, blackening heather that everywhere covered the restless heath.

Hating to appear foolish and at a disadvantage, I had a strong desire that he shouldn't guess my cowardice. As he came up to me, I reminded him with a most indifferent shrug, "Your pretty manners are all wasted, Master Kelleher. My father and all Cornishmen would tell you there's nothing Irish to equal the folk of Cornwall."

"Your mother was Irish," he guessed brightly.

"Somersetshire."

"Grandmama?"

"And one grandfather—Somerset. Papa's parents were from Bodmin. That's in Cornwall."

"You're a pretty thing, even if you are no belle of County Meath."

The Irish place name reminded me of Megan,

his English wife, and I barely refrained from shuddering as he put his hand on my arm. For all his lighthearted gaiety, I felt the fleshy warmth of his fingers upon my cold arm underneath my shawl. I thought of those fingers tightening upon a weapon to strike Megan Sedley Kelleher. I knew it was unlikely that so irresponsible a man would ever rouse himself to a pitch of desperation or fury during which he would destroy a human being, but all the same, I disliked soft hands.

I once knew a boy with just such soft hands whom I caught drowning small animals. Thanks to the stick of broomstraws I carried at the time, neither the boy nor his hands was able to do anything lethal for weeks to come. When he drowned in a bog the next year in an attempt to do the same to his small brother, I did not mourn. I removed Patrick Kelleher's hand from my person in a way that left no doubt of my sentiments.

"Come, acushla, you'll be shaming the very tongue of my Irish mother, throwing me off like that, and me but helping you to mount the Hill of Maidenmoor." Nonetheless, he understood my rebuff and behaved like a gentleman from there on as he persisted beside me. I compared his probable exaggerated attempts to match my stride up the steep cobblestones, with the typically aristocratic arrogance of Sir Nicholas Everett yesterday and found, to my surprise, that I had just the merest hint of a sneaking admiration for that detestable baronet. Sir Nicholas, as I recalled, strode along in

his own way, lifting me over obstacles when necessary but never making a nuisance of himself by buzzing about me with pantomimed suggestions of my overpowering vigor. I could not but feel that I was behaving in a most unfeminine way. I detested being made to feel so, and I said as much when we approached the Owl of York tavern.

"Master Kelleher, think you would do well to fortify yourself with your friends in that public house. I am persuaded your County Meath ancestors would expect it of you."

He made me a pitiful little grimace, begging my sympathy. "Not I, ma'am. And not alone, certainly. They'd have the scalp of me like the Red Indians. Shall I tell you why?"

"Please do not," I said hastily. "I am aware of—of what is said."

"And yet you allow me to share this little stroll in your company. You must be the only person in this benighted town beside my niece, Elspeth, who thinks me innocent."

"Really, you are behaving absurdly. I am not responsible for those who share the street with me."

The lovely crispness of the morning, which I had admired a short while before, had crept in between the wide mesh of my shawl, and I was growing colder by the minute. I wanted to hurry on back to a warm breakfast at Sedley House, but I was less than halfway up the hill, and my pace had been so rapid that it would not be possible to con-

tinue with equal haste. At that propitious moment we came opposite the Owl of York, which was exuding its steamy warmth and camaraderie to all who passed.

"Do come in, pretty Kate. Be my protectress. Give me consequence by your company."

What as Irish wheedler he was! But it was not flattering to be called the protectress of a suspected murderer who was surely of twice my proportions.

"I cannot possibly. I am awaited at Sedley House." Even as I spoke, I thought of the cold, silent house as it had been when I left it a little while ago. Mrs. Sedley always slept late, because of her discomfort and broken slumber. As for her granddaughter, I had rather enter a lion's den with Patrick Kelleher than sit at table with that rude young woman.

Patrick read my thoughts rather neatly.

"You'll not be telling me you prefer the cool, cutting tongue of my niece, Elspeth?"

"She is your friend, sir. You had best be grateful."

"Grateful to further orders, my lass. Do come. See? The hostess is beckoning to you."

I peered in beyond the passage, to where a pair of china lamps burned at either end of the taproom, and saw how the light glinted off the red-gold hair of the tavern mistress. She was a short woman of thirty or so and must once have been beautiful. She was still exceedingly pretty. It did

not seem to me that she was beckoning, but she was certainly staring at me, and suddenly the street where I stood seemed to catch the full blast of the mist-laden wind off the moors.

Well, I thought, *what harm can come of it? I will tell Father and Mama when I go home, and they will understand. Beside all else, I can demonstrate in this manner how competent I am to handle such awkward occasions.*

I allowed myself to be ushered into the passage, which was so steamy after the brisk weather of the street that I found my nose and upper lip suddenly perspiring.

I soon saw and heard it clearly demonstrated—not that I was competent to care for myself, but, on the contrary, that Patrick Kelleher had lied to me when he had said that all the village and everyone in the public house believed him guilty of murder. Quite different was the truth. He seemed obviously a well-known and popular figure in here, at least with those who greeted him. Various black-clad men and women clapped him on the back, made as if to cuff him, and asked if he was going to drink them all under the rail.

"Jassy, set up a rumfustian for the lad and his bonny lass," commanded a big fellow, hammering on the rail for the attention of the red-haired woman. She glanced from Patrick to me, her tawny brows raised. I did not feel comfortable under that look or in my present situation. In the general greetings, I could see that I was presumed to be

some female whom the Irishman had acquired, heaven knew where!

This was bad enough, but I began to be increasingly sure that the red-haired tavern mistress was an intimate of Patrick Kelleher and, absurdly enough, as it seemed to me, was jealous of my arrival in his company. Yielding to his taunts and coaxing had been a bad mistake on my part. I must find a way out that would not place me in an even more invidious position.

"It really is growing late. I am expected elsewhere," I lied, begging pardon of the big men who surrounded me and appeared to overpower me without intending to be more than friendly.

"Come, love. Here's to your bonny dark eyes!" boasted one of the huge, grinning workmen as he took a swallow of some heavy brown spirits and smacked his lips. It was like seeing a huge pink cavern open up before me and then become sealed again, and I felt myself more and more uneasy. I knew their good intentions, but when they pressed upon me their own partially full goblets and mugs, commanding me to "drink and take the chill off," I knew I must get out of here rapidly. However much I might observe in such a place, I must not drink any of the piratical potions. There would be no explaining that to Father!

"If you please, I must go. Please let me by."

Teasingly, the men closed ranks as Patrick laughed at my plight, not understanding my lack of experience in such places.

"Jassy, where's a warming pan for our pretty captive?" he called to the red-haired woman, who turned her back to us, then, a minute later, faced us, leaning over the taprail with a smoking mug. I could see that I should get nowhere by opposition, so I took the mug and made a furtive attempt to edge around the chief barriers to my departure. But there was more joking, in which I saw that the red-haired tavern mistress did not join.

I was growing more uneasy by the minute and tried to keep tight rein upon my nerves, for I knew that panic, a shameful emotion to me, would only precipitate gossip and might perhaps reflect upon my hostess, Mrs. Sedley, as well.

The crowd was milling about in such a way, and the room was so thick with smoke and steam and the smell of heated spices, that I had not yet looked behind me to see if there was an easier way to leave through the back of the room. I was envisioning disaster but not physically, for I suspected that at their worst these men and the scattering of females were only teasing, raising their own spirits before the long, hard working day ahead. But the gossip about this whole episode would make my presence impossible in Maidenmoor, not to mention what it would do to the opinion of me held by Mrs. Sedley, who would certainly pour out the whole story to Mama in a letter. Sir Nicholas Everett had said she was the busiest gossip in the riding.

Sir Nicholas! I shuddered to think how I should

sink even lower in his haughty dark eyes. The thought of his cutting disapproval was so intense as to be painful, for I did not like to sink that low in anyone's opinion, even that of the surly, authoritative aristocrat.

I turned, holding the untouched mug crushed against my bosom, and tried to see over the broad, black-clad shoulders of my noisy gallants. It was as if my fear of disgrace in the eyes of Mrs. Sedley or Sir Nicholas had magically conjured up the worst of my fears; for the man himself was gazing down at me, having quietly made way through the crowd, apparently after witnessing my humiliation, which I was sure he had enjoyed.

"If you have finished your rumfustian, we are awaited elsewhere, I believe. Come."

With a meekness that astonished myself and would have astonished Papa. I gave the mug into his waiting fingers and he set it back in the red-haired woman's hand, lifting it over the heads of those men and women in the way. The red-haired woman said quite audibly, "Ah! So that's the way of it!"

I did not like this insinuation, and I held back almost instinctively at Sir Nicholas's typical attitude of command, especially since it appeared that Patrick Kelleher had seen my difficulty at last and was cuffing villagers out of the way in the friendliest manner to reach me.

"So you'll be favoring His Worship, me dear.

That's the doing of the old dragon, as you'll find. And more. What's said of me may be true of our squire."

I assumed this was his tasteless form of a joke, but Sir Nicholas ignored it and reached for my arm.

"Don't be tiresome. Come along, Kathleen."

I had not given him leave to use my first name and resented it more from him than I would have minded Patrick's use of it, for the Irishman was a free-spoken man whom one need not take seriously.

Patrick grinned, but I saw that his tawny eyes were very still, unreadable, as he and Sir Nicholas gazed at each other over my head, and I remembered with a chill that both men had loved Patrick's dead wife, Megan Sedley Kelleher. Was it possible that Patrick's "tasteless joke" had been a hint to me of the baronet's guilt in the awful crime that others laid to Patrick himself? I had a strange, crushed sensation entirely foreign to me, as though I did not know which way to turn for help.

Sir Nicholas left me no such problem. When he took my reluctant, resisting arm, I noticed how quickly everyone dropped away from me, once my connection with him was discovered. I noted too that there was in their manner more than the respect normally accorded to the local squire—there was a scarcely hidden fear, a hesitancy to touch him. Or perhaps that was only my fancy, for I had just learned, through Patrick's barbed joke,

that when I said "good day" to the Irishman and went out with Sir Nicholas, I might still be walking with a murderer. It was easy enough to dismiss the Irishman's accusation as an old jealousy, but these men and women in the Owl of York shared a common fear of the aristocrat, and their sharing of it spread it to me. From all I had heard and observed of the men of Yorkshire, it would take something rather astounding and fearful to produce in them any terror, much less a sense of the superiority of the squire over the workman!

Once we reached the cobblestones and what I conceived to be the cold safety of the moorland wind, I said, with an attempt at recovering my self-assurance, "I was just leaving when you spoke, but in any case, thank you. Good day."

It was hard to keep any dignity with this man. Before I could leave him—and this was something I did at his chosen time, not mine—he managed to enrage me all over again.

"You are undoubtedly the most foolish child I have encountered in a lifetime of foolish females!"

"Indeed!" I said, drawing myself to my full height and looking up at him with what he afterward told me was a good deal of murderous fury. The difficulty was, I could not think of anything bad enough to say to him after that first "indeed" except to add another, ending a trifle lamely, "Well, indeed, sir!"

To my complete chagrin, he laughed aloud at

this, uncovering to me an entirely new facet of his personality and one I was to find much more dangerous. This grim aristocrat with the bitter dark eyes could find amusement in the world. It was not surprising, however, that his amusement came at the cost of another person's discomfiture. And I had to recall that vigorously; otherwise, I would have observed, to my own defeat, that when he did smile, he was even more handsome than the impossible man I had first met in the Hag's Head. It is always confusing to be so undone by one's dearest enemy!

"Come along up to Mrs. Sedley's, like a good girl, and do not put me to the trouble of rescuing you another time—not, at least, today."

But as we walked, I was already thinking hard, trying to imagine some way of disconcerting him. One idea, perhaps a trifle drastic, occurred to me. I could give serious consideration to the purchase of the Hag's Head. That would avenge me and in fine style!

I became so obsessed with this delightful method of infuriating him that by the time we reached Sedley House and I saw Meg Markham waving to me to hurry, could be civil and pleasant to the aristocrat, not letting him suspect what was in my mind.

"You have been most kind, Sir Nicholas. I hope to repay you one day."

"I'm sure that you do!" he said with the grim smile I remembered from yesterday and had wondered at then.

Now I thought I understood a little of its grimness. He had loved someone who had been murdered. Or he had murdered someone whom he loved. . . .

CHAPTER SIX

MEG SAID confidentially, "Old Missus is pretty upset, ma'am. She's a mind for making you known to her granddaughter. And then, seeing you with Sir Nicholas again, she's that feared you'll be stealing e heart of him from Miss Elspeth. It did no good, me pointing up the feeling 'twixt you and Sir Nicholas."

I said, "Really? What did she say to that?"

"She said any woman with eyes in her head would know good silver from dross."

"And which is the baronet?"

Meg chuckled. "Miss Kate, you are the one! You'd not be knowing the thoughts hereabouts. If it wa'nt for the whispers, many's the lass would throw her cap at Sir Nicholas. Him being that handsome! And rich, which is even better."

Fearing he would hear us, I paused and looked over my shoulder, but he was far up the street, already on the verge of great Heatherton Moor. In another few minutes even his formidable figure would be swallowed in that vast, dun-colored sea.

"What are the whispers, Meg?"

Her elbow jogged me painfully. "Could it be His

Worship that popped Miss Megan on the head and then set fire at Hag's Head?"

This confirmation of Patrick Kelleher's hint was rather horrible and lascivious. I wondered why people, especially women, got such wet-lipped pleasure out of reciting such stories.

I said stiffly, "A silly tale, surely, if he loved Mrs. Kelleher. I should think he would more sensibly kill her husband, in order to win her."

Meg shook her head at my naive idea.

"It wouldn't be Sir Nicholas, to be doing such things the way of sensible folk. Him with his dark temper and his dark doings at the Hag's Head."

I was fairly perishing to know what "dark doings" the magistrate and justice of the peace was about at the Hag's Head, but I was ashamed to show my interest, and I departed on this tantalizing note and hurried up the stairs to Mrs. Sedley's bed-sitting-room.

My hostess was sitting up in her large white-testered and frilled bed, looking at me a trifle grimly, although she motioned me to a place at the little drum table beside the casement windows. The other place was taken by Elspeth Sedley, immaculate in her pink-sprigged round gown, her exquisite complexion enhanced by the ribbon of pink holding her high-piled curls. If I felt my reception by Mrs. Sedley was cool, the greeting from her granddaughter was indeed frigid.

"Grandmama prefers to dine at correct hours, Miss Truro."

"Miss Bodmun," I corrected with my largest and, I am sorry to confess, my falsest smile. "You have the wrong town."

"When a place is out of England, I take little interest in it," Elspeth retorted, carefully buttering a scone with a precision that I might have envied in anyone else.

Since Cornwall was at that time of my life a part of Britain, though yet separated from England, I could find nothing sufficiently biting to say in return and took seat opposite Elspeth, still smiling for all I was worth. Not from me would she learn how her words and manner stung me or that I had not been informed of the change in breakfast habits this morning.

It was Mrs. Sedley who broke the difficult silence, with a soft, wistful glance at her granddaughter, by murmuring, "Now you have seen her, is she not worthy to be Lady Everett? She has all the femininity and all the careful rearing to support such a position at Everett Hall."

"Oh, Grandmama! You promised you would not mention him this morning," Elspeth complained, but I saw her glance up the street after Sir Nicholas, and I suspected I had her to thank for the talebearing about my second walk to Sedley House with him. I could not guess whether she disliked and suspected him, as she seemed to, or whether this was a mask for a quite different emotion.

"But dear," Mrs. Sedley persisted, stiffly and absently rearranging the dishes of breakfast eggs, tea, and ginger *moogin* on her tray, "I have it on the very best authority that a certain distinguished personage will be making an offer for you within a fortnight."

While Meg Markham served me, I listened and wondered how much of this was true and how much the mere product of Mrs. Sedley's fond dreams.

In part, Elspeth's contemptuous disbelief answered for me.

"Who is your best authority? That dreadful old crone his housekeeper?"

A little ruffled by this cynicism, Mrs. Sedley explained to me, "Mrs. Hardwicke is a woman of discernment, Kathleen. You must pay no mind to dear Elspeth. She is shy about marriage and covers it by this unbecoming attitude. But we shall have her the Lady of Everett Hall before the year is out; mind that."

For the first time in our acquaintance, Elspeth gave me an almost friendly glance, a kind of shared amusement.

"Why not marry off Kathleen to her precious murderer? She has taken a fancy to him. They are forever being seen together."

"A detestable, supercilious creature!" I said as positively as ever she had spoken. And as she gazed at me in disbelief, I went on, "But not, I think, a murderer!"

"You would know, of course!" said Elspeth nastily.

"Girls! Girls! That will do," Mrs. Sedley interrupted us, genuinely alarmed at the turn our quarrel had taken. "Let there be no more whimsical talk of dear Nicky and murder. His only crime was that he was devoted to my poor Megan."

"Dear Nicky!" repeated Elspeth, rolling her eyes. It was the first human expression I had noted on this face of hers, which had been extolled for its soft, feminine beauty. Elspeth's reaction, however. was contagious, and we both laughed at the preposterous notion of Sir Nicholas Everett's freezing countenance if he were addressed in that fashion.

Mrs. Sedley, naturally enough, did not see the humor of her own words. "I suppose I must allow Elspeth her little jesting moments during the last days of her maidenhood," she said. "All that will be changed, once she has the responsibilities of Everett Hall at her fingertips."

"I don't doubt it," Elspeth agreed ruefully. "That is one reason why I've no notion of . . ." She glanced at me and hastily ate her scone.

I wondered if she thought her uncle Patrick was a more honest man, less dangerous. Even in my dislike of Sir Nicholas I could not believe he was less honest, though possibly he was more dangerous than the Irishman.

I was startled when Patrick's name was suddenly spoken in the room and for a minute was afraid Elspeth had forgotten her grandmother's

feelings toward him. But it was Mrs. Sedley who said with a new, deep note of bitterness, "The very least that can be spoken of Sir Nicholas Everett would scarcely be equal to the unspeakable villainy of that creature who has come back to Maidenmoor to murder some other defenseless and loyal woman."

"Grandmother!"

"It is true, all the same. True that for twelve years your uncle has gone unpunished. But his time will come. He'll die as my Megan did, in his blood!"

"Not at breakfast, please," said her granddaughter coldly.

I was shocked, not so much by the expression of such violent passions—indeed, I have violent passions myself—but at the expression of them by fluttery, pretentious Mrs. Sedley. It also seemed pitiful to me that all her talk of Elspeth's sweetness and feminine passivity were mere dreams of the older woman.

When breakfast had deteriorated into a series of small forays between grandmother and granddaughter, the former returning to her polite, frilly ways, the latter sullen as I knew her, I excused myself with the remark that I wanted to make an inspection of any empty large houses in the area.

Mrs. Sedley's quick sparkle of hope made me feel quite sick with pity for her and anger at myself for having given her grounds to hope. She had enough problems without this new hope which might be blasted.

"You sly puss! I believe you are considering the Hag's Head after all."

"I fear it may be too large, ma'am. And it is always possible we cannot raise a sum sufficient to repair any of the damage which results when a house stands disused."

"Oh-ho!" Elspeth hooted, and I had a nasty suspicion that she guessed I had not originally had any idea of purchasing the dreadful, ghost-ridden old house.

What with my secret intention of annoying Sir Nicholas Everett by pretending to consider the purchase of the inn, and now Mrs. Sedley's dependence upon my making that very purchase, I realized there was nothing for it but to make good upon my visit to the Hag's Head. I dressed for it this time, however, changing even my present clothing for a warm green wool gown, with long, narrow sleeves and a round neck just relieved from severity by a white frill. In case this should not be proof against another sudden storm, I put aside my shawls and decided to risk damage to my best coat, one of which I was inordinately proud. It was of the new mode, slim-skirted and high-waisted, with narrow sleeves. I was about to run out upon the moor without anything on my head until I remembered the stiff breeze I had felt earlier in the village, and I had to go back into my room to fetch my sturdy green bonnet. Its wide ribbons, as I tied them under my chin, already showed faint stains

from an earlier rainstorm at home, though I had pressed the ribbons carefully afterward.

"Dear child," Mrs. Sedley called to me as I came out of my room, "Do be sure your feet are well shod. You will not wish to be walking into potholes and such."

I was familiar with potholes at home, and unlike yesterday, when I had run out after Timothy quite unprepared, I was snugly shod in shoes that were serviceable but not clumsy. I wished to walk about in the Hag's Head as silently as possible, in the hope of discovering whatever natural phenomenon caused the odd sounds that had disturbed Timothy and me. If I must go to the dreadful old place, I should at least accomplish something by satisfying my curiosity about its "haunts."

"Come in; there's a good child," Mrs. Sedley urged.

I was reluctant to join another quarrel with her granddaughter in the presence of the older lady, but fortunately for all of us, Elspeth had gone about whatever duties occupied her days, and I was able to step inside and receive Mrs. Sedley's further instructions.

"Now, my dear Kathleen, you mother had ever as keen an eye for a bargain as though she were Yorkshire-born and bred up. So I am persuaded you will not be behind her in such matters. You must note carefully the solid construction. The flagstone floors. Safety was the watchword when the Hag's

Head was put up. No storm could pierce those walls. No fire could—"

"I understand, ma'am," I said hastily. "I noticed how serviceable the floors were." Then I remembered something for the first time since I had left the Hag's Head. "That is, except for the objections the magistrate made to the place. Sir Nicholas thought the floors would go through."

She sat up straighter, puffing her pillows in an effort, I was sure, to hide her surprise and discomfiture.

"Oh, he did, eh? Made objections to Megan's house! Well, it's not surprising. It was an unhappy place for poor Nicholas. He was much younger then . . . when my Megan was alive. And each time that creature—that hateful, miserable Irishman—philandered with a different female, it cut Nicholas the more. He had not succeeded to the estate then, when my Megan was married, of course. Not until his older brother was lost two years later with his frigate off Cape Trafalgar, did Nicholas take the title. By then, it was too late for Megan."

I found all this extremely romantic and could not help asking, "Was she in love with Sir—with Nicholas Everett before her marriage to Mr. Kelleher?"

Mrs. Sedley shrugged, a gesture that must have caused her some pain, for she grimaced.

"There was some . . . *tendresse*, as they say, between them, I believe. But it came to naught. At

that time Nicholas was on leave from his regiment, a mere lieutenant, with no expectations. How could I know he would come into the title and lands, the richest man in the West Riding, in two short years?"

And of course, I thought, *you could never let poor Megan marry for love; so she married Patrick Kelleher—for what? A life of misery and perhaps even a bloody death at his hands.*

"Why ever did you let her marry Mr. Kelleher?"

She looked out the windows, and I wondered if she was realizing at this moment her dreadful responsibility for her daughter's tragic life.

"His lying tongue! What else was I to do? The Irishman came here with tales of his estate, the full half of County Meath, his fabulous ancestry. Well, in short, I was never more deceived."

No, I thought. *You do not see your guilt in all this.*

"I trust the weather remains open," Mrs. Sedley observed, gazing at the windswept sky. "I should prefer that you see the Hag's Head at its best."

I very nearly laughed at her absurd idea that the Hag's Head had its "best" side, but I agreed with her that I too hoped the weather remained fair. Bidding her good day, I left her.

I was going through the lower floor passage, which was shadowed and drafty in the morning, when something soft darted across my ankles and I reached down, feeling around my feet. I would

have been unpleasantly surprised to feel the sharp teeth of a rodent, but fortunately it was Timothy, who meowed, stood up, and clawed at my coat skirts.

"Really, Tim," I scolded severely; "you are not going to take me on some fantastic chase today! You are going to stay home and catch a fat mouse."

He wasn't, though. He knew perfectly well, the way cats and dogs always know, that I would feel more comfortable with him in my arms; for if anything odd truly was in the Hag's Head, no one would be more quickly sensitive to it than a cat.

I stopped off and found Meg Markham in the downstairs parlor and asked for something to use as a lead for Timothy. She produced his own leather lead, and after I had attached it as securely as possible, Timmy and I walked out upon the cobblestones.

Meg called after us, "Have a care, Miss. I couldn't but hear you talkin' of that dreadful place. It's that awful, I'd not even set foot inside! No, not if I was to be put to the stocks, I wouldn't."

I paused, turned back, and waited until she joined me.

"Meg, tell me the truth. What is it everyone fears at the Hag's Head?"

"But mum, ain't it known to you, about Miss Megan and all?"

"Yes, yes. You told me before supper last night. But what am I to expect there now? What do people see, or think they see?"

She looked over her shoulder as though she feared the ghostly visitants of the Hag's Head even here in the village.

"Well, then, it's the sounds that come and go. Like you wasn't alone. And the lights. Little flickers that seem to float right past the windows. But there's nothing. No light. Not even a candle, Miss. The lights ain't real." She startled me by reaching out, clasping my shoulders by her strong, heavy hands, and shaking me. "They ain't real, Miss! I seen 'em."

Bewildered, I ventured the question, "If they aren't real, how can you see them? Have you been inside when these things were seen?"

A woman passed us, going down the steep Maidenmoor Hill. She looked chilly with only a thin shawl over head and shoulders. For an instant I did not recognize her, until Meg let me go, curtsied, and said, "Shall I fetch a wrap for you, Miss Elspeth?"

The girl shook her head and went on, past Sedley House.

"That's an odd thing, indeed! Miss Elspeth in her aunt's shawl."

I looked after the girl with new interest. "You mean she is wearing Megan Kelleher's shawl? Is the lady's clothing in use at Sedley House?"

"Never! It would be bad luck to the giver and perhaps the wearer as well. Besides," she leaned toward me and whispered, "Miss Megan's clothing was never moved from the Hag's Head. Madam

—Mrs. Sedley, that is—would as lief traipse into hell as into the Hag's Head."

"But she told me there was no danger at the inn!"

"That's as may be," she said, nodding wisely. "But facts is facts. And long afore old Madam was twisted up in the hands and shoulders, she would not so much as set a toe in the place."

The old she-rogue! I thought. And there she had been, hourly telling me of the inn's fine qualities. Yet all the time she feared the place and looked upon it with the same superstitious terror as the veriest uneducated moorland dweller. However, so long as I had given my word, I intended, at the least, to have a look at the interior of the inn by broadest Yorkshire daylight. Just as Meg was going back into the house, I decided to verify my theory as to its location. I should be in fine case if I lost my way again on those endless moors.

"The Hag's Head is that prominence to the north and east, isn't it?"

"Aye! Cursed be the day!" Meg shaded her eyes and stared fixedly in the direction I had indicated. A part of the scramble of outbuildings was hidden by an intervening rise and fold in the moors, but I had been correct in my identification of the inn earlier this morning.

When Meg went inside, poor Timmy ventured to follow her, but upon being rebuffed by her indifference, and at the same time half-strangled by

his collar and the lead that I still held, he scrambled back to me.

I saw Elspeth Sedley go into a narrow garden beyond the Owl of York and wondered if she intended to meet her uncle there.

It occurred to me that if Elspeth was wearing her aunt's black shawl and these garments were normally left at the Hag's Head, then it stood to reason that Elspeth was not so reluctant to visit the inn as was her grandmother. I wondered if this had something to do with Elspeth's reluctance, or seeming reluctance, to encourage me to buy the inn. However, it might be that Elspeth simply had not yet encountered those odd lights and noises which bothered everyone else. Or it might even be that she and Patrick Kelleher made it their rendezvous.

I tugged on the lead to warn Timothy, and the two of stepped off the cobblestones and into one of those ubiquitous sheep tracks which had so confused me yesterday. Since we were both clothed for the crisp fall wind of Yorkshire, I suspect that Timmy enjoyed the invigorating walk as much as I did. Although he would have preferred to go his feline way, returning to me when he chose, something about the awesome expanse of the countryside, or perhaps his experience yesterday, made him stay rather close by me, even after he pulled the lead out of my hand at one point in our walk.

We climbed a bit before reaching the level of the

vast Heatherton Moor, and upon looking behind me I had a comprehensive view of the countryside in all its solemn, almost monotonous grandeur. The grandeur came, I think, from its sameness rather than from any single landmark of nature, just as the sea off my native Cornish coast derived its magnificence from its all-encompassing sameness, rather than from some occasional watersprout or other freak of nature. Heather still bloomed in places more sheltered from the wind, down nearer the bottomlands through which wandered the moorland becks, flowing now much faster and freer since yesterday's storm. There were many dikes of York stone throughout these regions which, at first glance, looked so untouched by man. But as Timmy and I began to climb again, we left behind us more and more of the signs of humanity, rising to the blackened heather and to the bleak desolation of the heath itself, where nature had never yet bent to man.

Although Father insisted that I would never be at home on this inland section of Yorkshire after a youth spent almost within sight of the ocean, Mama had known very well that I would find myself sympathetic to these serpentine hills, which were so like the gray-green waves of the sea; and the longer I walked, the more determined I became that if I should be fortunate enough to discover a house suitable to a young ladies' school, even if it were in need of repairs, I would consider its purchase.

Not that the Hag's Head was one of the "possibles." There would always be the problem of acclimatizing the giggly schoolgirls to the notion of sharing a house with ghosts of murdered ladies. Although I knew perfectly well that, whatever troubled the Hag's Head, it was not the Other World, even I had found myself obsessed by an odd and heretofore unfamiliar fear during those first few minutes before the arrival of Sir Nicholas yesterday.

After some time of walking, as we rounded the brow of a hillock on a muddy trail that must be impassible in winter, Timothy leaped back against my feet, nearly tripping me. As I recovered my balance, preparing to scold him, I was silenced by the sight of the little cat's hackles rising in a most significant way. I had not seen another human being on the sheep track since we left the village, and I had supposed until this moment that we were alone out in the very heart of the wilderness. But I was not one to deny the sinister evidence of Timmy's highly developed senses.

There was a steep decline in the trail beyond this point, and I could not see ahead of us, before the path plunged down. I did not have to wait more than a few seconds before the other solitary walker came lurching toward us with such an unsteady gait that I guessed he must be suffering from the effects of strong spirits. I pressed back against the hillside, making as much room for him as possible but dreading an encounter that was inevitable.

Timothy crawled behind my ankles and sat there on his haunches, spitting at the queerly bundled fellow of about thirty-five or forty, who staggered past us as if blind to all but the necessity for getting on.

CHAPTER SEVEN

THE DRUNKEN MAN was not as repulsive or as dirty as he had looked at first. Wearing a sheepman's warm dun-colored garments with a cap and a black jacket, he appeared to have fallen among faded heather, dead leaves, and mud—which was not surprising, in his condition. From the glimpse I had of his troubled eyes as he passed me, I began to think now that he was less drunk than dazed or feverish. I moved out from the damp furze I had been crushed against and watched him.

I was not surprised, though I winced, when he lurched hard to one side, his iron-shod boot slipped through a muddy patch in the trail, and he lost his precarious balance, weaved and swayed like a pathetic bundle of rags without flesh, and fell. He had dropped partially in the trail, with one arm and leg over the edge of the incline, and I was running to him before the dust settled on his coat. It is true there was a smell of spirits about him, and I suspected that it was the cheap Holland *genever*, or gin, which is called "blue ruin" where I come from. But yet I did not think it was the gin that had made him trip and fall. When I removed his

cap and felt carefully over his skull to see if he had hurt himself in this latest fall, he groaned and his body jerked spasmodically.

I spoke to him in low-pitched tones, hoping to reach whatever level of consciousness had responded to the pain.

"Tell me, sir, how were you hurt? How can I help you?"

His eyelids flickered at my second question, and he murmured something. I put my head close to his and heard the accents of a moorland dweller, rugged, not unattractive, and probably speaking weakly for the first time in his harsh struggle with a harsh world.

"I fell, love; fell. 'Twas by way of a mistake . . . entirely. Saw it . . . and fell."

He must be rambling in his mind.

"Never you mind that. Let me help you. Where are you hurt?"

". . . Saw the haunt."

"Yes. Yes. Don't think of it." A little desperate, I looked up and around at the sea of furze and small ridges that enclosed us on every side. I knew there must be a dozen coteens of local sheepmen scattered through Heatherton Moor, but I had not passed one on my walk, nor was there a building in sight now except the Hag's Head, which was up another rise and separated from our present location by a little dell crowded with trees and overgrown bushes. Timothy, who had behaved toward this poor man with such feline dislike, now crept

toward us, hesitating, then leaping closer, then crouching again. It was perfectly obvious he knew the injured man, and even more obvious he did not like the man, though I could not guess why. It may have been the smell of liquor that offended the fastidious little cat.

As for the man himself, his square, strong face had a kind of likable roughness that made me think of the Devonshiremen who often came into Cornwall seeking work on the seacoast when times were hard on the moors of Devon.

The man came to consciousness, clenching his teeth, and I put my hand under his head, trying to pillow him in the hope that he would feel well enough to tell me where he lived and where I might go for help. He did try to be helpful, struggling to sit up, and even in his present condition he was surprisingly strong.

When I started to get up, he seized upon me as though his life depended upon his grasp. "Can ye get me back to . . . the inn?"

The only inn in sight was the Hag's Head, and it was an odd destination for a man badly hurt, but it was certainly the closest thing to a shelter.

"I'll take you to the inn. Perhaps there'll be something for you to lie on while I go back for help."

"Good lass." He tried to nod but closed his eyes and looked alarmingly white behind what appeared to be a normal olive pallor. "Give a hand?"

Since he seemed so insistent, and now and then

had such curious flashes of something very like fear, I got up, and despite the pawing of Timmy, I managed to help the big man to his feet. He staggered and was dreadfully dazed. He kept his eyes squeezed shut, and it was all I could do to control his lumbering footsteps: but once we began the weary, dragging, pathetic march to the Hag's Head, at least there was no stopping him. Whoever he was, he managed to stay on his feet and to walk without opening his eyes. His cap had long since blown off again, and within the mass of hair at the back of his skull was a smear of dried blood, where I supposed he must have fallen the first time.

"Jassy . . ." he murmured, leaning heavily upon my shoulder.

I saw my chance to find his people, his coteen, or even his village; for he might well belong to Heatherton town across the moor—I could not be sure.

"Where is Jassy? Tell me, please, so I may go and fetch her."

I heard the name "Jassy" somewhere since I came to Maidenmoor. I wondered where.

He stumbled as we climbed the rise, and I paused with him at the broken gate that swung back and forth in the morning wind. He groped for the gate and missed it, and when I tried to hold him upright, we both nearly went down in the mud among the bits of charred wood and broken stone left here twelve years ago and weathered since to mere gray slabs.

". . . Not drunk, mum. No! Not . . ."

"I know," I said, breathing hard but getting him to the stoop where he might sit while I went around and opened the door from the inside.

"We be at inn, lass?" he asked as he settled down against the door. Then, as his head touched the door, he let out a ferocious groan that startled me into painful sympathy and sent Timothy scuttling away with his back arched. "Will ye fetch Jassy now? There's a good love. She'll be in taproom."

I was anxious to get him inside to rest so that I might consider where the nearest sheepfarm might be. From one of the upstairs windows I thought I would have a better view of the little stone buildings tucked away in the moorland, and surely, in the nearest one there would be someone who knew the injured man or his Jassy.

I said, "You must stay here while I open the door. Can you hear me?"

"Aye."

It began to trouble me that he should imagine his Jassy was in the taproom of this abandoned building. Could he possibly mean some other inn and some other taproom? Very probably. But it was too late now. As I turned and was about to hurry around the house to the entrance Sir Nicholas had used yesterday, the man reached out and caught my coat hem. His eyes looked very odd. The pupils seemed to be of different sizes, and his expression was vague. What worried me most was that there seemed to be drops of blood in his hair

beneath his ear, and this would be most serious if there was some injury within his skull, more deadly than the blow upon the back of his head.

"Tell . . . Jassy . . . wasn't drunk."

Poor man. Apparently he had often been under the influence of spirits, and now could think of nothing else but to fear Jassy's disapproval.

"I understand, sir," I said, trying to make him comfortably secure while I left him.

As I went around the strange old house, closely followed by Timothy, and passing the broken window where I had climbed in yesterday, I was amazed that I should have been so frightened on my first visit. Faced with the prospect of a genuinely frightening occurrence, the serious injury of this unknown man, I felt I could look upon any fancied horrors inside and laugh at them, for they would be mere figments of my imagination. The building was old, it is true, but there were many Cornish inns that were older, and under the bright open light of morning, even with the sun obscured behind puffed white clouds, the place looked like a solid, excellently constructed domicile for a young ladies' academy. It lacked only the brisk cleaning, the dusting and refurbishing that any unused house would require before one moved in. So it appeared from the outside, at least.

I passed between the inn and what remained of the outbuildings, a series of now broken sheds through whose shattered roofs the snows of a dozen winters had sifted and lain for many months, caus-

ing the floors within to become moldy from the standing water. It always made me sad to see disused houses, even disused storage rooms, and I thought of all the wretched people crowded into the cities with which I was more or less familiar, like Cardiff in Wales, and Falmouth and Plymouth in my own country. There were many inequities in life that I had observed on my journey from Cornwall into England and up to the North Country!

At the back of the Hag's Head, beyond the kitchen, was the scullery door through which Sir Nicholas and I had left the inn yesterday. I was surprised to find it swinging back and forth in the wind, not at all as my companion had left it; for I distinctly remembered his closing and latching the door. However, when I examined the flimsy lock, I saw that it was clearly possible that the door had swung open of its own accord, and I convinced myself that this was indeed what had happened. It was so desperately necessary to find some way of getting help to the stranger that I had to believe the old inn was deserted.

I hurried through the scullery and the kitchen, which, to my senses, still smelled of the thousands of roasts of mutton that had been spitted and turned here in the great fireplace. It smelled too of charcoal and crisp kid's flesh. But once again, and more insistently now that I knew what had occurred here, there was the odor of burned wood and cloth, and of mold, that everpresent sign of disused and sad places.

I found myself, ridiculously enough, lost in a passage between the pantries adjoining the kitchen, and the common room through which I had entered yesterday. I watched to see which way Timothy would go, but he darted back into the pantry to lick the stone floor where—heaven knows how long ago!—someone had spilled sugared tea. I found I must pass through a china closet to reach the front of the house. It was interesting and touching to note there were still the china and the cutlery and the old mugs and wine glasses on the shelves just as they had been when the tragedy occurred twelve years before. There was even something upon one of the plates. I assumed it must be food left at the time of the murder, and remarkably well preserved. Almost astoundingly so.

Once more, as during my first visit, I heard the creak of floors or walls upstairs, along with the familiar, yet no less unnerving, tap-tapping sound. It was comforting to recall how Sir Nicholas had dismissed such sounds as products of my overactive imagination.

But I could not stop to examine this or other mementos of the life that had existed here years before. I rushed through the little passageway of the china closet, which joined the hall at the front of the house, and found myself again in that passage which had led to the great pier glass hanging against the side of the staircase. At least, in this part of the house, I knew my way. The sight of my figure running toward its reflection was absurd to-

day, when compared with the frightening thing it had seemed to be yesterday, before I knew what it was.

It was extraordinarily difficult to get the front door opened, and even when I succeeded, I had managed to wrench off the lock before I had it swinging wide inside. I was trying to help the stranger stumble into the main passage at the foot of the stairs to the upper floor, to greater comfort on the rush-covered floor, sheltered from the wind and weather, when I not only heard the odd sounds overhead, but saw that the sick man heard them as well. His eyes tried vainly to focus upon the ceiling, and in the bad light his sallow color seemed to have gone gray with fear.

"This ain't Owl of York." His fingers fastened on my skirts, and he tried to shake me but was much too ill to do more than startle me. "What've ye done, wicked creature! 'Twas here I got it in the head."

I shook myself free of his fingers, as much shocked by his sudden madness as by his words. He tried to raise himself, but I made him remain seated. There were bloodstains on the lobe of his ear and his collar, and I knew he must not move. I had seen seamen before who had got their skulls cracked open. They nearly always died.

"Please be still, sir. Do not move. I'll bring you something to calm and warm you while I get help."

"No! Don't be goin', love. I was only giving a bit of a . . . tease. . . ." I bent over him, for

he seemed ready to whisper something. I thought perhaps I should gain a knowledge of his identity if I could know a little more about his work and about what he had been doing here at the Hag's Head. "Lass," he whispered. "Look up 'em stairs. . . ."

I looked. Beyond being excessively dusty and dark, they held nothing more sinister than silence.

"Aye, but it was . . . on that stair, I saw the—haunt. . . ."

I realized with a thrill of horror that it was this word he had spoken out on the heath and I had not understood. But it was all his sick fancy. I could not heed him. If I did so, he would very likely die even sooner.

I rushed into the taproom a few feet away from him, but there were only half a dozen bottles, and it maddened me to discover that all the contents had either dried up in some way or drained out owing to bad corkage. And not another thing could I find to preserve the poor man's swimming senses.

There were the cellars, of course, but I preferred not to venture into that place of dreadful memories unless it became absolutely necessary. I tried the kitchen and the stillroom, but not a bottle was left. Glancing outside, I could not find a well or spring anywhere within sight. I did locate a candlestick with a fat half-burned candle, and behind it, almost too conveniently, was a firemaker.

With the lighted candle I hurried back to the sick man, followed by the swift, darting Timothy.

Nothing about the man moved except his eyes. In attending him I had to turn my back to that staircase at which he stared so fixedly above my head. The little cat waited for me also, his gray-green eyes likewise fixed upon the staircase. It made me more than a little nervous. I could not resist glancing over my shoulder. I cannot imagine what I expected to see, and I saw nothing but shadows.

"Tell—Jassy . . ." It was the first thing he had said in several minutes, and I realized that his condition was rapidly worsening.

I took up the candlestick, telling him I would be back immediately, and with the sturdy little candle lighting the way, I made swift work of the trip back behind the staircase that led to the upper floor. It was in this direction that Timothy had darted the day before, when he must have snagged his collar on the bit of lace from the cellar debris. Therefore, I assumed the most direct steps to the cellar must be back here. Behind the upper staircase I did indeed find the flight of stone steps pitching downward into the cold, musty darkness where, long ago, Megan Kelleher had died. I descended with great care, rather sardonically observing the caution with which Timothy stayed behind me.

The candle revealed an entire wall of bottles and barrels. Some of the latter were obviously empty, the bung holes open, and here and there among the cobwebbed bottles there were a surprising number of empty spaces. I began to suspect

that it had been visited by various wine-loving moorland citizens along with the stray gypsies who often made this region a landfall in their endless journeying. Tongues of the long-ago fire had licked at the wooden structure of the wine racks, but it appeared that this fire had come through the burned door from the other cellars, for the walls between the cellars were of stone and impregnable to those flames.

I had no time for sightseeing and gazed just once into the next cellar, one of the centers of the fire, which was not as black as I had expected, because of the many cracks in the wall of the west, or entrance, side of the building at a level with the ground. Inside this burned cellar and the one beyond it, there was so much blackened debris that I assumed most of it was the contents of a cold storage stillroom, which had, of course, been destroyed in the fire and produced that haunting, acrid odor which permeated the house above.

Actually, Mrs. Sedley had been right. From what I could see of the cellars and the ground floor above, the building was still solidly constructed and very likely a bargain. I turned back after taking up a bottle that felt heavy and seemed to gurgle a little. I was just moving up the steep steps, having called Timmy away from his exploration of the burned area, when we heard a piercing shriek near the taproom above us that made Timmy arch his back, sitting, and gave me such chills that I found it even more difficult to run the rest of the way. I,

at least, knew that that shriek of mortal terror came from the wounded stranger, and I could not imagine anything so awful as to produce such a sound.

At the top of the steps a sudden gust of wind from the open front door blew out my candle, but I was in too much of a hurry to reach the sick man to pay attention to that. There was light enough in the open doorway so that the stranger would not be in the fearsome darkness. I was deeply concerned to note that he had moved away from the protection of the door and was crawling, with irrational, crablike movements, toward the forsaken taproom. He had crawled only a few feet when I reached him. I did not dare cry out to him to stop this deadly motion, for fear the sharp command itself might act as a cruel prod to his movements.

As quietly as possible, I went and knelt before him, trying to ease him against my arm, but he was too heavy. I had to drop the dusty wine bottle and use all my strength to hold him partially upright. I spoke to him soothingly, as I had once seen Father speak to an Irish lobsterman who had cracked his skull when he had got off course in his small black corragh. His glazed eyes stared past me, over my arm, at the dusky shadows high on the staircase behind me. Had I not been so busy trying to make him reasonably comfortable so I could go for help, this attention to things at my back would have made me more than a trifle uneasy.

When I had him at least protected from falling,

with the wall of the taproom behind him, I tried to uncork the dusty bottle but found it impossible. I got up, went into the taproom as far from him as possible, and broke off the bottle at the neck. My hands smelled to heaven of soured wine, but that was hardly important. Watching the bottle carefully, I carried it back to the stranger, and since I could not put the broken bottle to his lips and didn't have time to fetch a cup, I wiped my left hand carefully on my petticoat, then poured as much wine into my palm as it would hold and held it to his lips.

He reacted like the good drinking man he must have been, moving his lips and moistening his tongue with the tart, vinegary wine. This action must have been instinctive, however, for his eyes remained fixed upon that illusive and dusky area at the top of the staircase.

It was about a minute later, just as I thought he was showing some signs of a return to conscious awareness, that the pupils of his eyes dilated, becoming even in size. He made a convulsive effort to rise, and raised his arm, pointing it straight out and upward over my shoulder. I was astonished at the sudden power he demonstrated and was almost ready to speak to him rationally, when he opened his mouth and uttered the same ear-splitting scream I had heard in the wine cellar. It was so shocking, I reeled back and nearly fell.

"The haunt—the haunt!" he cried hoarsely,

and fell forward against me like a block of wood, crashing lifeless across my body.

With an enormous effort I managed to twist around without removing him and look at the staircase. It was quite true that in the brown dark, among what must be endless cobwebbed space, untouched in a dozen years, there was a peculiar aura very like a pallid mask of a face.

While I stared at this eerie thing, so like a weird old hag, Timothy leaped up from where he had crouched by the door of the inn and sped out into the desolate garden. Whatever this was at the head of the stairs, Timothy had sensed it too.

CHAPTER EIGHT

I STARED UPWARD in a paralysis of terror, half-convinced by the actions of a cat and the fancy of a dying man that there really was a ghostly presence at the head of the stairs watching me.

Some slight sound outside shook me out of this dreadful stupor. I blinked, then felt vainly for the pulse of the man whose life had been snuffed out by that peculiar hallucination. My hands shook so much that I found it difficult to command myself, but when I looked up the staircase again over the stranger's dead body, whatever grouping of light and shadow had joined to form the stranger's "haunt" was now dissolved into nothingness. I felt myself alone, terribly, painfully alone. I had no more hope for the dead man; and for myself, I felt a frantic anxiety to get some human being besides myself into this place, to scour it from top to bottom, conclusively destroying all dust, cobwebs, fire debris, and anything else that might be mistaken for ghosts or haunts.

When I was absolutely sure the man was dead, I got up painfully, tried to lay him out on the floor where he had fallen, and went out of the Hag's Head. I began to descend the slope upon which

the inn stood. In a few minutes I was running. It did not surprise me when Timothy darted along beside me, staying close, never scampering off to himself as he had the day before.

How long it was before we reached a well-traveled little carriage road I do not know, but when we had walked for several minutes along the wagon ruts through dying heather, a horse came trotting along behind us, dragging a gig which rattled and shook as though the wheels might roll off at any minute.

Seated in it were Patrick Kelleher and a beautiful red-haired woman who looked vaguely familiar.

What a rogue he is with the women, I thought. *First, the unfortunate Megan Sedley; then Megan's niece, the celebrated beauty Elspeth; then his easy, smooth flattery in my direction, and all the time this obvious understanding with the red-haired woman.*

"Jassy," he said to her briskly, with an indifference that seemed to me insulting, "make place for the pretty Kate."

"Jassy?" I repeated with the sickened realization that this woman's name had been on the lips of that poor Yorkshireman whose body lay now, untended, on the floor of the Hag's Head.

I remembered at last where I had seen the woman before and heard her name. It had been in the taproom of the Owl of York, into whose steaming confines Patrick had wheedled me this morn-

ing. When I repeated her name and, after picking up Timmy, hesitated to climb into the gig, crowding its occupants, she looked a trifle surprised.

"Yes? You know my name?"

"It was a man who spoke the name," I explained, then paused, wondering how much of a shock his death would be.

Patrick began to look uneasy. He peered off in the direction I had taken across the heath and furze bushes.

"Is Macrae looking for her? Did he seem out of sorts?"

"Drunk, I'll wager!" said Jassy in disgust, not very much interested.

I wondered suddenly if these two could have had anything to do with that dreadful blow on the back of Macrae's head or the frightening of him and me at the Hag's Head. I said, "You must have just missed him. Have you been on the road long?"

Patrick was surprised at what he conceived to be my change of subject.

"I caught up with Jassy Macrae some minutes ago as she was crossing the heath."

"Looking for Macrae, so I was!" she said angrily. "And much good it's done. Half a day's custom at the Owl lost. He's drunk over in Heatherton, like as not."

"No, I'm afraid he isn't," I said, trying to be as calm as she was angry. "I suspect it was Mr. Macrae I watched die of a broken skull in the Hag's Head today. I was just going for help."

"God in heaven!" cried his wife, and clapped her hand over her mouth. Her ripe beauty seemed to crumble behind the latticework of her fingers, and I saw that she was as old as Patrick or Sir Nicholas, but so beautifully "boned" that one would suspect her to be a woman in her early twenties. Whether she had loved her husband or hated him, one couldn't tell, but she was not indifferent. I began to suspect that any relationship between her and Patrick was very likely his doing.

At any rate, he moved rapidly now to take my hand and help me into the gig with Timmy in my other arm.

"There's a quicker path a little to the north," he said.

I objected. "Would it not be better to go to the village first, to bring . . . whatever is needed?"

"Is he dead?"

"Oh, yes! I'm sure of it."

"Well, then?"

I had no argument against such nonchalance. I myself was still as badly shaken as was little Timothy, whom I held against my bosom, a warm, soft, confused little bundle. But of course we had seen Macrae die in that dreadful way; and perhaps even more intensely disturbing, we had witnessed the peculiar phenomenon in the dusty shadows on the landing above the stairs. I knew, of course, now that I had the chance to consider it at a safe distance, that the pale, bodiless face Macrae had mistaken for a "haunt" was merely one of those

oddities formed by light and shadow; yet I still could not explain why the face had disappeared as I watched it.

Despite the nonchalance of Patrick Kelleher, I was relieved to have run upon him and Jassy Macrae; for even though I had been positive the man was dead, I would much prefer that other human beings should make an effort, however futile, to revive him. Whatever the seriousness of Macrae's head injury, I was convinced that the thing that had precipitated his death was the sight of the pallid, imaginary face staring down at him from the stairs. Imaginary it was, but deadly, too. I felt that if I could persuade someone to examine the inn from attics to cellars with me, we would exorcize those legends and make nonsense of such phantom faces; but I confess that after Macrae's cries of "the haunt!" I lacked the courage to explore the Hag's Head alone.

"How did Macrae break his skull?" asked Patrick as he guided the horse and the rackety, overcrowded gig off into a road that was hardly wider than a sheep track. I glanced at Mrs. Macrae, but she was holding tight to the side of the gig, biting her lips and gazing silently into the vast moorland distances.

"I think he fell down the stairs at Hag's Head," I said. "When I met him out on the heath, he murmured that he had fallen and asked if I would get him to the inn. Since we were within sight of the Hag's Head, I thought—"

Patrick shook his head.

"I'm afraid he meant his own and Jassy's place, the Owl of York."

Yes. I knew that now. And I knew too that if I could somehow have got the poor man back to the village, or even left him in a sheltered place on the heath, his life might have been saved. But death had been upon him from the moment he entered the Hag's Head. Thinking aloud, I repeated this truth and became belatedly aware of how it disturbed my companions.

"You'll not be telling us he saw the Hag?" Patrick asked, looking less amused. His hands tightened upon the reins in a fashion that, to me,betrayed some strong emotion, perhaps apprehension or even fear.

"Pat!" said Jassy in a low, disturbed voice. "Don't conjure! Don't conjure!"

I knew what she meant. Until I said it aloud, I did not guess that these two reasonably intelligent village people shared poor Macrae's fear of "the Hag."

"I saw it myself," I said, hoping for some sort of reasonable explanation.

"Aye!" said the woman bitterly. "She's done for him at last, the evil one—the Hag!"

"What did it look like to you, Kate, this thing you say you saw?" Patrick asked me, without any of the teasing, laughing quality that normally made his voice light and pleasant to hear.

"Very like an old crone's face," I said, seeing

that ghastly "haunt" more vividly in my mind's eye than it had seemed to me at the deserted inn. I don't believe I had quite comprehended the enormity of the happening at that time.

Patrick pursued this phantom picture. "Almost mask-like in its pallor, with a kind of oddness, as though you'd be thinking it's that thin, you could see through it."

"Just so," I agreed, feeling a chill at the thought, despite the warmth of my coat.

"Do not, ma'am. I beg you!" Mrs. Macrae cut in sharply in an anguished voice. "It sounds that real I can see its very face."

So could I, and since we felt this common reluctance to discuss the ghostly face, it was Patrick who had to probe for explanations.

"I daresay it's how the place got it's name. The old dragon, Megan's mother, bought it at a good price, partly because of the legends and partly because she's a sharp one. Megan claimed to have seen the Hag's face once. But the business of the flickering lights and the ghosts that are forever being seen by visitors to the moor . . . Well and all, that's since our time."

Ever since Mrs. Sedley had condemned the Irishman out of hand for his part in the death of his wife, I had wondered what his side of the story was. I was quite sure his version would differ notably from that of the justice of the peace, Sir Nicholas Everett. As the gig bumped over stray roots and blackened heather, I saw that we were starting

up the incline to the Hag's Head and its outbuildings. My own nerves were none too good, but I could not help noticing how stiff and tight Jassy Macrae sat beside me. I felt that she either cared more for her husband than anyone suspected, or she was in mortal terror of something. I could well appreciate either of her emotions.

Before the gig had rattled to a stop, Jassy Macrae swung over the side and leaped to the ground. She ran across the desolate garden, her petticoats fluttering and her hair flying in bright red streamers behind her. I hoped this panic was born of concern for the poor dead man, but I had one of those odd feminine intuitions that told me she was concerned with something other than the loss of her husband. What that concern might be I could not imagine. But when Patrick lifted me down and we followed her across the threshold of the Hag's Head, I saw with feelings of revulsion that I had been right.

We found her kneeling beside the bundle of mud and wine-stained rags that was Macrae just as I had laid him out in the taproom half an hour earlier. But she was neither praying nor pillowing his battered head nor examining him for wounds. She was certainly examining him, however. She ran her hands over and through each of his garments, appearing more and more dissatisfied as her skillful long fingers came away without having found whatever it was she searched for.

"You're a cool one, Jassy," Patrick commended her with what I hoped was deep irony. He looked

around, studying various parts of the ground floor, reliving old memories, as I thought, memories of the life he had lived here with Megan Sedley. I wondered, did he think of the way he had left her here to die? Or perhaps he had been away from the inn when it happened. Was it Mrs. Sedley or Sir Nicholas who had suggested to me that Patrick was off awaiting another woman when he allowed his wife to die? In that case, perhaps someone had wished Megan Kelleher to die.

Watching him and speculating on his part in her tragic death, or perhaps his lack of part in any attempt at her rescue, I remembered that he and Jassy had been out on the moors separately today by their own admission. Jassy's reactions had been so strong, though not for humanitarian reasons, that I eliminated her from my rising suspicions. She had certainly been surprised at her husband's death. But Patrick had been in this region also at the very moment Macrae and little Timmy and I were being terrorized in this house. Separately or together, Patrick and Jassy Macrae must also have been in the region when Macrae was injured. From Macrae's first words to me on the heath, I supposed his fall down the stairs had happened because he was startled by the strange apparition of the "Hag," the phenomenon of light and shadow and cobwebs that later caused his death. But was it possible that some human agency had caused that hag's face to appear?

"What do you think of the place, Kate? Is it worth your purchase?"

I ignored his familiar use of my childhood name, on the theory that he very probably would address Queen Charlotte by the name "Charley" if he were admitted to Her Majesty's presence. I was about to make some equivocal reply when Jassy Macrae rose from her husband's body, extremely conscious of Patrick's question.

"You're making purchase, ma'am? When is it to be?"

I had the word "never" upon my tongue, when I bethought myself of those earlier suspicions and looked around the taproom and the lower floor before replying calmly, "I've not decided quite when. But soon, I should think. An excellent bargain; don't you agree, Mr. Kelleher?"

Patrick walked over to Macrae's body and made an attempt to lift the man but was forcibly stopped by Jassy Macrae, who launched a tirade that staggered me by its vehemence.

"You'll not touch him, Pat! I know what you're about, selling the place out in such a fashion, and to an outlander! It's all of a piece with the rest. It's to keep me out. You're not satisfied now you've got my Macrae stopped. What's next in this place of horror?"

None of this made any intelligence to me except to restore my suspicions—first of Jassy, then of Patrick—but precisely what these suspicions were I did not yet know.

Patrick watched her in a fashion that would have done credit to Timothy pursuing a mouse. "My girl, shall I conjure up the Hag's face for you? Is that why you've such a touching devotion to my dear old home?"

Instinctively, both Mrs. Macrae and I glanced up at the staircase, but the clouded sun in the wide Yorkshire sky outside the front door was now overhead and no longer cast those suggestive beams into the cobwebs. I was tremendously relieved to see nothing more horrifying than the dusty staircase. I could observe Jassy Macrae's similar relief, but I had not the least notion why she should resent my possible purchase of the Hag's Head.

I offered to help Patrick remove Macrae's body to the gig, and we managed it between us, with the strangely reluctant assistance of Mrs. Macrae, who located a motheaten blanket left by some trespassers in the common room at a time past and wrapped the body with it. The mare kicked up and nearly overturned the gig, but Jassy and I soothed her down, and by the time Patrick had settled the wrapped body securely in the gig, the mare was subdued, if not enthusiastic.

It was not the mare but Jassy with whom we had the most difficulty. Patrick said, "Take the reins, Jassy. There'll barely be room for you and—" He broke off, adding with a glance at me, "Kate and I will cut cross the moor by a footpath."

"Now, that you will not!" cried Jassy. "You take

the gig and young Miss and Macrae. It's me that walks."

I could not understand this disgusting anxiety to avoid her responsibilites, nor could I understand a certain watchful waiting on the part of Patrick Kelleher. For some strange reason he was deliberately taunting Jassy.

"Get in!" he said, his voice softer, frighteningly sweet. It gave me chills and brought Timothy scuttling out from under the wheels of the gig. I called to the little cat so sharply that he heeled to attention, and I picked him up around his middle so that he dangled limply over both sides of my hand. I watched Jassy Macrae climb up into the gig with an assisting boost from Patrick. She looked down at us before giving the mare a tug on the reins.

"I know why Macrae was in the Hag's Head," she said with tightly leashed anger.

"And I know," Patrick repeated, ever so sweetly. "Go along."

She rode off. Until the gig and the mare were at the foot of the incline we could hear the rattle of wheels. Then there was no sound but the purring of Timmy close to me and, further off, the stiff, moaning wind as it swept across the great open heath.

Meanwhile, I glanced around the interior of the inn, feeling that someone ought to straighten things around. Also, no matter how wracking the thought

was to the nerves, someone, not to say myself, should walk calmly through every room of the inn, throwing wide the shutters and opening all windows, and thus forever stopping these wicked, anti-Christian apparitions of ghosts and old crones' faces. Perhaps my intent showed upon my face. I already suspected that Patrick did not look with delight upon the prospect of my purchasing the Hag's Head, and I was beginning to wonder what secrets the old place harbored that made so many persons violently antagonistic when the matter of its purchase arose. Nothing less than a cache of rubies warranted such strong feelings!

"Kate, lass, you are beginning to have a buyer's eye to all the details of my onetime home," Patrick observed teasingly, but I had a feeling that he was more serious than he sounded. "You know, of course, that it was impossible to heat, and one could not walk without the crack and the creak of every accursed board in the house."

"I thought the floors were of York stone," I reminded him with a pleasant little smile, but my mind was working furiously on this odd effort of his to talk me out of any plan to purchase. Since I had never seriously contemplated a purchase, this seemed doubly amusing and also, in an odd, contradictory way, made me slightly more interested in owning the old place.

"Ah, well, of course." He shrugged. "If you *will* defy the Hag, my lass, that'll be your concern."

He looked out at the sky, while I saw suddenly

the drying stain on the taproom floor, an odd color, not like blood at all, but rusty and pale. Poor Macrae! Did no one shed a tear for the fellow? From the brief contact I had had with him, I thought him a rather likeable man—a drinker, true, but one expected such moorland men to drink. Theirs was not an easy, sedentary life.

"Now, I wonder what your interest might be," Patrick pursued the matter, with that same odd persistence. "Can it be that you intend to settle yourself to live in this forsaken old wreck?"

"Quite!" I said, more pleasantly than before. I think, perhaps, he guessed that I was being heavily ironic, and it did not become me. Even I recognized that. "Shall we be on our way?" I asked, more like myself.

"Kate," Patrick began, and I knew, or strongly guessed, what was to follow. "It appears that there are things I'll be needing in this old wreckage and few occasions to do so. If I direct you, will you be able to make your way to Maidenmoor? You're such a clever puss, you can do anything you set that busy little mind of yours to."

"No need for your honeyed Irish tongue," I said briskly. "When I do purchase this house, I'll seal it off and put about no-trespass notices, and heaven help the man or woman who ventures upon my property then."

I started out the door and, not at all to my surprise, was rather hastily followed by Patrick Kelleher, who ventured in that wheedling way which

must have served him well in his lifetime, "Katie me Darlin', don't be cross now. If I can but get past the old dragon this night, I'll be driving you to Heatherton Fair. Won't that be worth the wait?" He patted me upon the back of the hand, and I am happy to say Timothy hissed at him.

Before stalking off, I stopped long enough to say, "During your rather—if I may say so—*long* life, has someone told you,my dear sir, that your company is preferred to your absence?" He brightened under this until I added, "If so, I suggest you devote your evening to that person; for I feel quite the reverse!"

"No, now . . ." he started to say, but I walked free of his pursuing fingers and started across the garden in the rising wind to the gate, which had finally broken away from the low stone wall when we were bringing out Macrae's body.

"Will you not be asking the way, then, pretty Kate?"

I felt a powerful inclination to reply, "Not in the least, pretty Pat," but restrained myself from what I can only say was an almost overwhelming temptation.

He must have felt a certain moral responsibility for my safety, however, for he hurried out after me, trampling over the blackened heather and pointing out with some urgency, "Remember, Kathleen, you take the straight of it, not the cross-trail, or you'll end up at the Hag's Head again."

"And we mustn't have that, must we?" I asked

sweetly, and hurried away from the grim but oddly fascinating old building and the less grim, less fascinating, and slightly less ancient Patrick Kelleher.

The wind swept across the moors, twisting and curling up from among the moist, velvety hollows and pushing everything before its fury. I was glad I had dressed for chill weather, for it was quite cold despite the frosty northern sun, which appeared and disappeared among the tumbled clouds. In the distance to the north I made out a bundled sheepman and his flock, separated from me by innumerable waves of hill and dale, little black borders of woodland, a tangled spinney or two, and always the grandeur of solitude.

How many sheep trails there were crossing my path! Even Timothy, going before me in short, odd cat-leaps, was confused. As for me, I had not realized before how deceiving the sheep trails could be, even when the sky was piercing and blue and windswept, as now. I had been so disgusted with the Irishman, so anxious to be away from his annoying wiles, that I had not quite concentrated upon his directions. However, I did remember that I was to take "the straight of it," rather than one of these cross-trails. Not a very difficult thing to remember at first, while I was still in sight of the Hag's Head and had but to turn and study the path behind me to get my bearings.

But by the time the inn was hidden behind more and greater slopes of mauve and dun color, the

wind had raised to a furious roar, sweeping furze bushes, blackened heather, and loose dirt across the heath before it. Timothy disappeared ahead of me, and I followed him down into a little thicket of entangled trees and bushes through which meandered a stream, or "beck," as the local inhabitants called it. The banks of the stream were emerald-green with moss, but as I started across this carpet my feet sank down into the soggy morass, curiously red in color. I had never seen mud quite that color. I decided to follow the stream until there was less boggy red mud to get across.

It was dark in here among the bushy trees, which had many times before trapped all the flying debris from the moorland storms. I was so carefully avoiding the boggy patches that I paid the price of my single-minded concentration by snapping a twig in two and lodging the pointed end inside my shoe. I put out one hand for balance against the trunk of a sapling and raised my foot, emptying out my shoe and tapping it against the little tree.

Timothy thought I was playing some sort of game with him and leaped up to paw at my shoe, dropping back afterward with light, boneless ease, only to stop as he raised his paw again. Suddenly he dropped to all fours and crouched there with his ears pointed stiffly upward as if he were listening. His sensitivity suddenly made me aware of the thick, dusky look of the little copse around us. The moorland wind high above our heads, snapping at the top foliage and roaring on to produce

havoc elsewhere, made it impossible for me to hear betraying sounds of other life than Timmy and me in the little copse, I could trust the acute senses of the little cat.

I still had my shoe off, and with the sudden realization that some person or animal was near us, unknown and unseen, I limped around in a panic, trying to get my shoe on. At the same time I looked before me along the tangled way I had come since reaching the beck and tried vainly to see a bit more behind me and on either side. At my left side was the soggy moss, and beyond was the water making way through the reeds and rushes and tumbled rocks. Dimly, I could see through the bushes on the opposite bank, and I made out nothing more dangerous than a furry little brown rodent of the moors, drinking at the beck, but with a watchful eye and ear out for Timothy, who at the moment had no interest in him.

I was fairly sure there could be no danger in whatever had disturbed the little cat. The most savage creatures in this area were the watchdogs owned by the farmers and small-property owners of the countryside, and any hound on our trail would have leaped long ago, either at Timothy or me. I watched Tim carefully to see which direction disturbed him and saw on the slope above us a vague, indistinguishable creature half-hidden by the fiercely blowing bushes. It was probably a great mastiff that had been following upon our trail and hovered over us where the ground dipped

sharply down toward the beck. The beast had chosen a perfect place for an ambush. It had but to leap down upon us.

I snatched up Timmy, along with my shoe, and stepped hastily across the wet, mossy bank, feeling the mud ooze about my stockinged foot as I leaped the last hurdle into the stream. I heard my own cry of pain as my unprotected foot twisted upon the sharp stones of the stream bed, but I had a healthy fear of the dogs hereabouts, whose vicious protection of their masters' property was a matter of legend, and I could not stop to pamper myself.

Once I reached the opposite bank, I scrambled up, squeezing the cat until I was surprised he did no more than meow plaintively. It was obvious that, like me, he was too frightened to feel pain. Just as I paused a minute to discover the quickest way through the wind-blown thicket at the top of the bank, Timmy gave a loud, open-mouthed snarl, and I glanced back across the stream, expecting to hear the furious answering growl of our pursuer. Instead, I saw once more a peculiar, indistinct presence hovering in the darkest wooded part of the thicket, near where I had first stopped on the other side of the stream to remove my shoe. A most peculiar dog, if dog it was, not to have leaped after Timothy or barked at the very least. For one dreadful moment, doubting my own sanity, I fancied that the pallid mask of an old crone gazed up at me from the heart of that thicket. It was too fan-

tastic. In the next instant I knew that my encounter at the inn today had obsessed my thoughts.

It was enough for me. I slipped my shoe on and scrambled through the bushes, which scratched and clung to Timothy's fur and my coat. Then I began to run, finding that my ankle pained me hideously and hindered, but by no means stopped, my flying feet.

I had not forgotten Patrick's warning to me to take the trail straight on rather than any of the sheep paths that crossed it. I saw no sign of crossing trails and felt that by great good luck I had come out of that thicket exactly into the path I sought. I ran on, hoping to gain ground and perhaps cross another low-lying beck before the beast tracking us made his decision to cross the first stream. Our scent might be destroyed by that stream. I hoped so.

I began to limp more and more painfully, and suddenly I stumbled over a rock in the path, like any ignorant London outlander. I went down on one knee, barely catching Timmy before he slipped out of my arms, and fell upon him. I got up, gritting my teeth against the intermittent, stabbing pain through my left foot, which I had wrenched in crossing the stream. I felt it quite beyond my power to run any further, but I managed to limp along, concentrating upon one step at a time.

It seemed to me that something was emphatically wrong about this path. I should have reached the Heatherton High Road long before this. Overhead, the clouds had gathered so that they

gradually absorbed the sun and the whole heather was gray with the look of an approaching storm. I groaned at my abominable luck and paused to make quite sure I was heading in the right direction. I had reached the highest plateau of the moors, and on the northern horizon loomed a series of buildings that appeared much too imposing for a moorland sheep farm. I wondered what they were but was too worried to speculate.

At the same time I heard a shrill sound like a whistle, and Timothy leaped from my arms in panic. I swung around, feeling excruciating pain upon my sore foot as I put my full weight upon it. The pain, however, abruptly ceased as I saw a pair of huge hunting dogs, lean and swift and doubtless, hungry, bounding over the dying heather, with me as their prey.

I started to run, turned on my injured foot, and, as the dogs leaped upon me, fell into a deep, all-encompassing blackness.

CHAPTER NINE

I CRIED OUT, "Don't let them eat me! Oh, please do not!" This preposterous plea was the first thing I heard upon recovering my senses, and it very naturally provoked an answer from a voice I recalled as being odiously right at all times.

"Don't be ridiculous. No one is going to eat you."

"Nor Timmy either!" I added, taking advantage of the absolute and godlike quality in this man's voice.

"If you mean that detestable little bundle of fur who abandoned you in your extremity—"

"It is scarcely his fault that he is a cat," I said indignantly, opening my eyes and finding, with an uneasy start, that my rescuer's face, with its deep-set dark eyes and its stubborn, harshly beautiful mouth, was very close above my own.

"Well then," he said as he saw me open my eyes, "the creature shall not be drowned in a rushy mere after all. Mind that, Jacob."

"No! Indeed, no! Do not drown him. Please . . ." I began to stir around, discovering that Sir Nicholas, in hunting jacket and with a frightfully efficient-looking rifle tucked under one

arm, had somehow made me comfortable against his body, and we were both settled on the windy heath, speckled by the first raindrops that heralded the coming storm. This was improper and embarrassing enough, but it was plain that it had all occurred under the interested eyes of Sir Nicholas's loader, a grizzled fellow with a big grin and many teeth missing.

"Aye, mum, we be watchful of the bitty creature."

"Well, I should hope so!" I said indignantly, trying to rise. But I was slapped back by something slippery and wet and warm across the lower half of my face. It proved to be a gigantic pink tongue.

"Down, Mealy!" thundered Sir Nicholas in that authoritative voice which instinctively touched off the battle light in my own nature.

"Let him be," I said irritably. "He is merely being friendly." And then I muttered, somewhat to my own surprise, "What a disagreeable man, to be sure!"

I did not understand why he laughed aloud at this. It seemed an odd thing at which to find amusement.

The great mastiff, however, did not share my feelings of conflict against his master. After Sir Nicholas's command he came to heel, whining, a sound that I could only take for a compliment. I reached out and patted the good fellow, wondering how I could ever have been terrified of such a docile creature. His comrade, a smaller and leaner

dog some distance away from us, was busy pawing, chewing, and growling over a huge mutton bone.

Sir Nicholas, who saw my sympathy toward the animals, explained, "Jacob gave him that bone to comfort him. . . ."

"How nice of Jacob!"

I gave the big toothy loader my best smile, until Sir Nicholas added, "To comfort him when we could not let him chew upon Miss Bodmun."

I felt that I had received a distinct setdown, and I sneaked one more look at the lean, growling dog, reflecting that but for Sir Nicholas and Jacob I would, at this moment, be in the same case as that wretched mutton bone which was audibly cracking under its teeth.

"I confess, I prefer the big monster beside me," I said boldly.

But I was immediately caught up by Sir Nicholas's sly remark, "My dear Miss Bodmun, not very flattering, to be sure."

I flushed red as a lobster and pretended not to have understood him. Then I fumbled to find another subject, reaching out and petting Mealy upon his huge, receptive head while Sir Nicholas prepared to move on. A protesting meow disturbed me, and I saw that Jacob, the loader, had Timothy in his big pocket, probably crouched uncomfortably upon a bed of bullets, and Jacob's huge fingers were knuckling Timmy's head in a friendly way.

"Would you truly have drowned him?" I asked, worried over what might have happened if I had not come to consciousness until later.

"Timmy is one of those creatures who will always land on their feet, like many a female I have known," remarked Sir Nicholas drily as he handed his rifle to Jacob and reached under my waist in a manner I found much too familiar—though I should have known what he intended by his businesslike approach.

In any case, I started as if I had been stabbed, which was not only ungrateful of me, but naïve, as I realized immediately by the faint, contemptuous curl of Sir Nicholas's lips.

"Be at ease, my dear girl. I am not the Kelleher lout. I assumed from the way you were rubbing your left foot that you had twisted your ankle and could not walk."

I had the grace to mutter, "I beg your pardon," but it was an effort. His cool, competent, ungracious handling of any emergency made my apologies to him sound quite unnecessary and, I supposed, unwelcome. I added by way of explanation, "It is not my ankle that gives me trouble, sir, but the arch of my foot. I believe I pulled a muscle in my foot when I was running across the stream to escape your dogs."

"These infants," he sighed, "with their blind exuberance . . . What stream was that?"

I did not have a chance to answer, for he was removing my shoe, and I became very conscious

of my dirty, mud-encrusted white stocking. He pinched my foot at the instep, and I jumped, but more from the pressure of his fingers than from pain. He ran his thumb along the arch of my foot with a surgeon's indifference to the pain of his patient, and this time there was no mistaking the root of the problem. I gave an enormous start and only kept from screaming by pressing my teeth hard into my lower lip.

"Young Miss seems tolerably pale, Yer Worship," Jacob noted with some of his employer's clinical curiosity.

"Yes. I think we have the seat of the problem," said Sir Nicholas. "Put your arm around my neck, Miss Bodmun, and do your best not to choke me."

Fiercely resenting the position in which my own clumsiness placed me, that of once again owing my comfort and even my safety to this odious aristocrat, I did as he commanded, reflecting that it was much easier to obey such intimate orders from a man I disliked than from a man for whom I might have had what Mrs. Sedley called a *tendresse*. He lifted me with the greatest ease, which would have surprised my father, who, upon my birthday three months earlier, had offered me the dubious compliment, "My little Kate's become a strapping fine lass!" and then pretended to stagger as he raised me off the floor by his hands around my waist.

Mealy, the great mastiff with the tongue as wide as my face, conceived that when his master swung

me off the ground he was somehow borrowing Mealy's prerogative, and he barked fiercely, jumping about in his excitement. But apparently he was too much in awe of Sir Nicholas to leap upon him, for which I was very grateful, though the baronet seemed to have no fears on that score. Mealy was joined in his barking by the vicious hound with the mutton bone, who, however, might be said merely to have barked between bites, for I could plainly hear the intermittent crunch of snapping, slivering bone, and I shuddered.

Each step Sir Nicholas took seemed to jar my entire body. But to give him his due, I do not think he meant to jar me, and I felt sure that when he spoke to me he intended, in his unromantic, matter-of-fact way, to take my mind off the pain.

"You said my dogs chased you into a beck. Where was this?"

I tried to explain, but it was a disjointed description, and the only clear point of the matter was that the little vale and the stream were heavily shadowed and not too far from the Hag's Head.

"I know the place. A spinney where some of the local moorland lads take their lasses for sundry purposes. Megan and I used to meet there . . . in our younger days."

Jacob, the loader, coughed to cover any disrespect and murmured, "Yer Worship, maybe the lass is a bit young for such facts, so to speak."

I said indignantly, "I know exactly what you are talking about." It made me angry, for some inex-

pliable reason, to learn of Sir Nicholas's philandering with Megan Sedley before her marriage, despite what Mrs. Sedley had told me of their understanding, which had broken up because Nicholas had no expectations. How wrong Mrs. Sedley had been on that score!

Sir Nicholas cut short my speculation on the matter. "That is neither here nor there. The point is, my dogs have been nowhere near Seven Spinney today. . . . Miss Bodmun, my neck, please. Not my cravat!"

I let go of his cravat with haste, noting guiltily that my dusty fingerprints were smudged upon its snowy surface, and I held on to his neck, feeling odd and rather shy. It was a strange sensation, entirely foreign to my experience at home, where my relationship with males was a friendly one, much as it had been in my childhood. I could not imagine myself being uneasy in the presence of the boys I had known in play or the fishermen and tinkers and townsmen I had known all my life.

"That'll be an odd bit of news entirely, sir," said Jacob. "About the dogs, I mean."

I assumed that Sir Nicholas and Jacob must be confused as to where the dogs had been, perhaps not knowing exactly what time I had been at the spinney.

"But this was an hour gone by, I should think. And anyway, I did see it."

"I'm sure you did. You need not be so defensive."

Sir Nicholas turned his head, and I saw Jacob come up beside us and shrug. I could not understand their confusion about it and ventured further, "Perhaps it was before you were on the heath. It—it might have been earlier. But it wasn't simply me, sir. It was Timothy also. He saw the dog and was frightened. That was how I first knew we were being followed."

"Do you mean to tell me your cat saw some fancied animal and you ran so hard you hurt your foot?"

"It was *not* a fancied animal! Ask Tim—that is," I amended hastily, "look at Timmy. He ran even faster than I did."

Sir Nicholas had his usual sardonic look, which still managed to suggest maddeningly that though his exterior was perfectly serious, within he was laughing at me.

"I'm sure that he did. He looks a cowardly feline if ever I saw one. But the fact remains, none of my dogs have been near Seven Spinney today, and I doubt very much if anyone else's dogs were either, unless it was a poacher, and they know they can be shot on sight. No dogs and no hunters are let to run upon this heath except mine."

"Sir, do you call me a liar?"

"My dear Miss Bodmun, I have never called you anything but what you are, an inordinately tiresome child. I believe you saw something, though indeed, one can scarcely attest to the observations

of your cat. But what you and your precious Tinny really did see arouses more interest in me."

I began to be aware of a return to that cold terror I had first felt at the Hag's Head when the wounded Macrae had pointed at the top of the staircase and screamed and died. What had Macrae really seen?

"I thought it must be a dog—a hound, perhaps —trailing us."

"What precisely did you see—or think you saw? Tell me exactly; omit nothing."

"Sir," put in Jacob, "could it be the young lass was acomin' from the Hag's Head and the haunt give chase?"

"Oh!" I remembered suddenly the peculiar illusion I had had when looking back across the stream, my feeling that what I saw through the shadows of the little copse was the pale, masklike face of an old crone.

"Yes?" Sir Nicholas prompted me. It seemed almost as though he could read my very thoughts and did not find them so incredible after all. I explained quickly about my visit to the Hag's Head with the wounded Macrae and how he had screamed and died. This aroused even the imperturbable Sir Nicholas.

"Good God! I should think the poor devil would die at such a sight! First getting struck upon the head, and then to be returned to the very place where it all happened—poor Macrae! So he saw

the Hag! He was ever an unlucky beggar. Loving greedy Jass, who herself loved his property, the Owl of York, not Macrae. And then, to be taken back to the very place where he met his death-blow!"

"But it was no fault of mine. I was on my way to the Hag's Head, and naturally I thought that was the inn he spoke of." I looked around from my perch in the baronet's arms, hoping to change this subject which came dangerously close to blaming me for Macrae's death. "You cannot think I imagined the whole!"

"Indeed not, Miss!" Jacob assured me, being thus appealed to. "There'll be forever talk on that wicked ghost creature that takes its way about the Hag's Head. Nor do 'is Ludship think it's your imaginings. His Worship, the justice, that is."

"Never mind, Jacob. You tire the young lady when you talk of such things as my titles. She would much prefer to title me that Dreadful Man, or even that Disagreeable Creature, either of which will do nicely and will not give me the setdown I so richly deserve. Is that the case, Miss Bodmun?"

It was shameful to be reminded of my rudeness to him, but then, it was ungentlemanly of him to have noticed, and I was heartily glad when he said briskly, "I fear there is nothing for it but to take you to Everett Hall. My housekeeper will make you tolerably comfortable. But meanwhile . . ." As I prepared for some horrid quizzing, he boosted me up higher in his arms and smiled at

Jacob. "Whatever the danger to you, Jacob, keep friend Tinny safe!"

"Timmy," I corrected him.

"You heard the lass, I trust, Jacob. Mind you, no throwing him in the pot to pace out the stew."

"Aye, sir. But about the old Hag . . . 'Twas seen by me and by others, as Yer Worship knows. Are we to think we all saw mere phantasms? My mother saw the Hag many a time and oft, sir, beggin' your pardon, sir."

We had no "Lordships" in my part of Cornwall, and it was difficult for me to show deference to this haughty justice of the peace as his servant did. Such careful respect would have been considered fawning by the rough fisherfolk and townsmen where I lived; yet no one there was of a tougher fiber than these Yorkshiremen, so I felt there must be manners I had not yet learned—a thought that rather surprised me.

"Do not talk to me of hags!" said Sir Nicholas in a voice that made both the loader and me apprehensive. "If it comes to that, I may be forced to burn down the wreck myself. I am tired of these idiot visitors traipsing in and out across my own property to get there, fancying they see ghosts and the like, when all that lies within is the proof of Patrick Kelleher's murderous design upon his wife. If I can but find it."

"I am not an idiot visitor!" I reminded him proudly. "I am by way of making the purchase. What do you think of that?"

Sir Nicholas turned his head, which was so close to mine that our faces touched, and I felt a sensation of warmth and a quickened pulsebeat theretofore unknown to me. He did not seem in the least changed by the encounter, however, and was just as insufferable as ever.

"I think, in your present position, you would do well not to challenge your preserver. I may very easily drop you here on the heath for wild dogs and guytrashes to nibble at."

"You came here by purest accident," I reminded him.

"My child, I never hunt by purest accident. Nor do I act upon impulse. I have considered purchasing the Hag's Head ever since Megan—Mrs. Kelleher—was murdered, but it did not seem necessary, as no one else was anxious to own it. But let me tell you this"—he shook me with a rather awesome power—"no little snipper of an outlander child is going to make purchase and develop it for prying visitors. And if there is more trouble there in the way of such tales, it shall be burned to the ground. It is unhealthy altogether."

What absolute nonsense! I thought. *Why in heaven's name should I buy the Hag's Head merely in order to show it to visitors? If he ever listened to my plans, he must know they have nothing to do with exhibiting it.*

His argument seemed more childish than any of my behavior—unless, of course, he was jealous of Patrick because of Patrick's dead wife. But that

had been long before. I could not imagine myself being so bitter over something that had happened twelve years before, with the murderer undoubtedly long gone out of the county in the meanwhile. Why, twelve years ago, I had been not quite six years old!

There was one other thought that was rather insidious and extremely unpleasant in the circumstances, but I could not quite drown it. What if Sir Nicholas had murdered Megan Kelleher himself, when she would not run away with him, and now he wished to find, not evidence against Megan's husband, but evidence against himself that had not been destroyed in the fire?

"I cannot imagine anything of less interest to me than the destruction of evidence," I said with my chin in the air, then reverted to normal with a serious thought that needed preparation before I spoke it aloud. "I had a thought just now, but you must promise not to think me a fool."

"I promise not to say you are a fool," he amended in his grave voice whose true seriousness I was beginning to suspect. "Jacob, the gates, if you please. And as for you, Miss Bodmun, you will forget about hags and dead men for the moment and concentrate upon enjoying a decent meal and a bit of cosseting by Mrs. Hardwicke, my housekeeper."

I began to be nervous. I had not thought beyond merely being rescued. I knew perfectly well that Mama would never understand this, my being a guest in a bachelor's home! She would never un-

derstand either that I should be in absolutely no danger *of that sort* from Sir Nicholas, who, in all likelihood, despised me for an incurable rattle and an utter incompetent.

"I do not wish to put Mrs. Hardwicke to any trouble," I objected meekly. "I'm sure if I could be set upon the road to Maidenmoor, perhaps in a vehicle of some sort, or even on horseback . . ."

"Be quiet. I must lift you over a stile. Here. Jacob, have you the maze-gate open? Ah, just so. Here we are. Now, as for Mrs. Hardwicke, I assure you, nothing would give her greater pleasure than to make a grand fuss about you. So mind you, make objections if she grows obnoxious."

"Oh, never! It is too kind of her, really. I do not wish to cause inconvenience or anything of that sort."

"Rubbish! How does your foot feel?"

I wiggled it and winced but became aware for the first time in the past fifteen or twenty minutes that I had been much more comfortable in Sir Nicholas's arms than I would ever have been in anyone else's care. I had to give him full honors for having argued with me so strenuously during this stiff walk, for I had not once noticed the pain of my strained foot muscles.

Then I looked around. So this was Everett Hall! I could well understand Elspeth's reluctance to exchange the charming, comfortable Sedley House for the cold grandeur of this estate. We approached by a side route, but I could see the estate road at the

front of the long, rectangular stone building of four stories and a series of attic windows, besides innumerable outbuildings and a truly impressive and carefully trimmed maze. Even at the end of the season, as now, the park was green, the foliage and trees were elegant and well kept, and the entire state, as nearly as I could make out, had the look of a place on exhibition. I could not imagine that any children had ever played here or that any loving mother had spent time under the shade of these precise, mathematically designed trees and flowers. I could see a part of the kitchen garden, which seemed much more human, more likable, and I thought that if I had been reared here as had Sir Nicholas and his brother, I should certainly have spent all my time near the kitchens. But perhaps my family, being yeomen, gave me a clearer and more comfortable feeling with the company of the lower orders amid such stateliness.

I knew very little about architecture but assumed Everett Hall had been built after the Tudor period, perhaps in the late seventeenth century. It had a look of clean lines and great care, and I wondered how Sir Nicholas felt about it, having acceded to its dignities too late to win the one girl he had loved Did he feel that it was all hollow grandeur and worthless?

"Jacob, call Mrs. Hardwicke. I'll take the child to the summer parlor until there is a bedchamber made suitable."

"Don't trouble, please. I'll be leaving soon. . . ."

"Hush!" said Sir Nicholas. "I can scarcely hear myself think."

I gave over protesting and allowed myself to be taken through a long gallery whose elegant high ceilings, crystal lusters, and fabulous portraits of dead Everetts left me quite speechless. I was sure that Carlton House itself, and even the Royal Pavillion at Brighton, were simply nothing compared to the noble dignity of Everett Hall. And small wonder. Carlton House was the demesne of a mere German prince, and Everett Hall had been British since time out of mind. I was so fascinated by all the portraits that I was still looking back over Sir Nicholas's shoulder and trying to get a good look at each of them in turn when he reached the open door of a bright, cheerful room that must have belonged to the womenfolk of the Hall. Even with the heavens overcast and the windows speckled by mist, the room was still a lovely, light place and just large enough so that I felt quite at home and not stifled by my surroundings. If this room had been deliberately chosen by Sir Nicholas for me, he had much more sensitivity than I had suspected in so proud and cold a man.

He dropped me upon the worn but lovely old silk covering of the sofa, and before I could catch my breath and thank him after the pain of my shaken foot subsided, he was out in the gallery

giving orders to a woman whom I took to be the housekeeper.

I sat up, rubbing my foot and wondering how I should ever make myself presentable to do justice to such an elegant household. Nothing the housekeeper could do for me would substitute clean, white stockings for my muddy, tattered ones or new shoes for my low travel shoes. And here was my best coat, which looked as though its hem had been dipped in the mud—as, in fact, it had. Upon giving some dispirited attention to my general appearance, I was surprised that the noble Sir Nicholas hadn't thrown me back onto the muddy heath, rather than risk soiling his own fine hunting jacket by carrying me.

I ached in every bone and felt sure Sir Nicholas did likewise, but when I leaned back dizzily against the sofa, there was my green bonnet dangling halfway down my back and my hair falling in long witchlocks around my shoulders. I was too tired to care.

In this disheveled appearance, my second in as many days, I felt even less comfortable when I beheld the woman in the doorway, a middle-aged person in black, so uncompromisingly stuffed into her dress-uniform that she put me in mind of a sausage on two flat, serviceable feet.

"You be the young person Sir Nicholas mentioned, mum?"

I was so nervous that I nearly answered "Aye!"

which would have shocked Father and Mama no end; for they had seen to it that I was reared up to proper English like the gentry, Father having done well in the merchant line after beginning as a clerk and supercargo on the coastal packets to Ireland. But except for Mrs. Hardwicke's language, which had the twang of the lower orders, she affected me almost as did Sir Nicholas upon first sight. Her graying hair was braided and wound around her broad, not ignoble head, and her bosom was like a great shelf carefully encased. The rest of her too was in every way the perfect representative for a great house. I longed for her good opinion of me and started to explain my accident.

"Aye, 'tis the way of it, mum. Sir Nicholas has obligingly explained. Come along of me, leanin' so—upon my arm."

Thus challenged, I felt that I must put my weight on that foot, whether I could or no, and set my feet upon the floor and hopped over to her with gritted teeth. The hopping movement made me quite giddy with pain, and Mrs. Hardwicke, watching me, seemed to be weighing me in some curious way.

"Enough, lass; enough."

Gladly, I stopped and clung to the pretty spinet near the door.

"I see ye're right enough."

I looked so astonished that her face broke into a grim smile.

"It's been tried afore, Miss. Usually the ankle, I believe. I was that surprised Sir Nicholas fell in with your little scheme." I was bristling indignantly when she added, "Many's the Heatherton miss that has a fancy to play Lady Everett and we've had such a blooming of turned ankles as would give pause to a passel of surgeons. I'm Mrs. Hardwicke, lass. Sit ye down. Here. Let me see that foot."

"I'm sorry I'm so muddy. I did not wish to stain the lovely sofa, and all."

She was busy looking over my stockinged foot. "Nonsense. They'll clean. I have an efficacious remedy. Hmm. A good stiff soak in boiling water with a bit of powder and a brisk rubbing afterward will put this foot in much better case. . . . So you're the lass that means to make purchase of the Hag's Head."

Confused by this change of subject, I murmured, "It's hard to say. I haven't really seen it yet. Only the ground floor and the wine cellar."

"Not a bad bit of business, that."

I did not know whether she meant the strained muscles of my foot or the purchase of the Hag's Head. and I hesitated to reply to this equivocal remark. She seemed to have forgotten it as she went on her efficient way, testing my toes and my ankle.

"You were lucky, lass. You might have broke a bone and limped the rest of your life like Hardwicke does. I had an aunt who did so, and from a simple turned foot, just as you did." Cheerful

thoughts, both of them, but she went on as though such were everyday problems. "So you haven't been abovestairs at the Hag's Head."

"Not yet."

"Hmph. Be advised and do not."

I began to be suspicious of her interest in the old haunted place. Was she pleading her employer's case by warning me away from its purchase? I thought it rather shabby and unworthy of Sir Nicholas.

"I haven't decided yet," I explained quite truthfully.

"Just so. Just so." She paused and looked up at me. "It would be best if you do not bespeak its purchase in this house, or even make mention of the inn itself."

"Really?" I asked with an edge of scorn. "I am not afraid of His Lordship's disapproval."

She looked at me several seconds without replying. It made me singularly nervous.

"I see His Ludship's not told you the whole of it. The Hag's Head was the property of my husband's people since it was built, and that'll be nigh two hundred years agone. And while Hardwicke—my husband, that is—was off fighting the Frenchies in Egypt and getting his leg stiffened, his father sold out the Hag's Head to Mistress Sedley and came for to drink up the profits of the sale."

"I'm so sorry," I murmured, not seeing how I was to blame.

"Aye. 'Tis a sore matter to Hardwicke. I thought

he'd as lief do murder to Miss Megan and the other when he come home from the wars against Boney-pat, dragging a leg-like, and that cross to find his father'd left him naught but liquor debts. But we've a fair good life in Sir Nicholas's service. May-hap he'll be forgetting, one day." She rose from her knees with a satisfied air ill befitting the bitter story she related.

"Now, Miss, ye'll be right as right, once ye've had a proper soaking of that foot."

"You are very kind." Then I added what concerned me more at the moment in this palatial manor house, which was so unknown and awe-inspiring to me, and in which I felt I could get lost and not be found for a fortnight. "Perhaps it would be better if your husband does not learn about my interest in the Hag's Head. After all, I may not purchase. I do not know for sure, not having seen it all."

"May be," she said skeptically. "But Ezra has sharp ears, and he's not above listening at keyholes."

"And what, my love, am I not above listening to at keyholes—or even doorways?" asked an oily male voice in the open doorway behind us.

CHAPTER TEN

I STARTED GUILTILY, wondering how dangerous Ezra Hardwicke could be if he heard such news in its worst possible aspect, by eavesdropping.

Mrs. Hardwicke made me flinch with her brisk indifference to the feelings of this dangerously embittered person.

"Get on with you, man. We are talking female talk. The lass was by way of being rescued out on heath by His Ludship."

"Dear me, dear me," murmured the man in the doorway, chuckling with such an evil sound as fairly curdled my blood. "Another of the little lambs, is it?" He came limping into the room dragging his right leg noticeably, for it appeared to be stiffened throughout the knee and calf region.

Everything his wife had suggested about Ezra Hardwicke seemed to be true, but in a curiously reverse manner. I had expected a huge, burly man, beetle-browed and ham-handed. This man, on the contrary, was a lean, cadaverous individual with lined face, curved back, and as malign a smile upon his bloodless lips as ever I saw. He looked as though the very marrow had been sipped from his bones and what remained was the mere dry

carcass. Yet there was that smile, revealing small, gleaming white teeth.

His wife said briskly, "It's a different ewe lamb from the others, Ezra. And one that deserves some respect, I'm thinking. Miss—what was your name, lass?"

"But my dear Sophy, what would it be except 'Bodmun'? This is that very ewe lamb that's come to hunt down and exorcize the ghost at the Hag's Head."

Mrs. Hardwicke looked vexed, and I was downright worried. He made a stiff little bow whose grotesque elegance even his black homespun stockings and his cobbler's apron could not destroy. Once upon a time, I thought, his family had been gentry, and something of genteel old manners showed through the dry and mocking exterior. Though I felt a repulsion toward him based upon Mrs. Hardwicke's unwifely warning, I felt sorry for him too, in an odd sort of way based partly upon a respect for what he had once been.

"I am Kathleen Bodmun, but it is not very imposing—or even a name of any genteel importance, sir, and I am surprised you know it so well," I said. Then I added, as a sop to their good nature, "I'm very sorry to have put you to this trouble, but a pair of Sir Nicholas's dogs chased me across the moor, and I turned my foot on a stone when I was crossing through a kind of wooded bottom."

The Hardwickes exchanged glances. For the first time I wondered if each was deceiving me

about the other. Perhaps her warning to me had been deliberate, for strange reasons each of them understood about the other.

"But surely, Miss," said Ezra Hardwicke, his gray eyebrows raised, "You're never saying you found dogs of this locality in Seven Spinney?"

"Is it possible you think I am lying about such a trivial thing?"

"A lie is easy," said Hardwicke, inclining his head as one who has often taken such refuge, "but when you speak of Seven Spinney as a trivial thing, well . . . that is quite another matter and worthy of comment throughout the length and breadth of the West Riding. We, all of us, know that Seven Spinney is a place shunned by our hunting dogs." His voice was so full of scorn that even the oily surface did not cover it. I remembered suddenly that Sir Nicholas and his loader had behaved in the same way when I suggested that their dogs had first caught sight of me in the cope that they called Seven Spinney.

I said hastily, "I saw the dog, across the little stream, what you call in these parts a beck. At least . . ." The first, preposterous idea of what I had seen there came back to me now. I hesitated to mention it, knowing how they would scoff at the idea. "At least, I thought it must be a dog, because it could not be what it looked to be."

Mrs. Hardwicke and her husband spoke at the same time, she to interrupt, and he to ask with sur-

prising excitement, "And what did this—thing—look to be?"

"The Hag," said I.

Mrs. Hardwicke dropped my foot with a suddenness that made me wince, but her husband either did not have as much interest in the haunted old inn as she had thought or was a superb actor. He said with his rodent's amiable and toothy look, "But what nonsense is this, Miss Bodmun? I must confess I am familiar with the peculiar attitude of the local hunting hounds over Seven Spinney. It is not that anything of great moment occurred there. A nest for lovers—"

"Ezra!" his wife interrupted, for all the world like my old governess, Miss Higsby.

His smile widened, and he shrugged. "Well, then, it is only that you are not the first to see the Hag. It was a legend among all the Hardwickes. And with the—the woman, Megan Kelleher, murdered at the inn, well, what have you? Who would possibly wish to dwell where such things take place? Everything in the vicinity is haunted, merely by suggestion."

I tried to laugh, for I was sure he told me this in an attempt to frighten me, because of his vindictive hatred for anyone who expressed an interest in the Hag's Head.

We heard Sir Nicholas's steps in the gallery then, and I noticed the tension that gripped us all, including myself, as he looked in at us. "What,

Sophy? Haven't you got that lass into bed yet? At this rate of speed, she will not be awake for dinner."

"I don't mean to stay for dinner," I put in calmly, very grown-up. "I shall be on my way as soon as I have soaked my foot for a few minutes. I do not intend to be a burden upon anyone."

He looked at me quizzically. "I have ordered a syllabub and all manner of pretty desserts. That should sweeten your disposition. And you may imagine in what case I shall be with Cook if you refuse it now. What do you say, child?"

The sound of "syllabub and other sweets" was exceedingly good to hear, but for my pride I had to remind him, "If I were a child, as you seem to think, sir, that should set all aright. As it is, I am much more concerned about the peculiar thing that pursued Timothy and me out of Seven Spinney today."

The Hardwickes were plainly upset by my persistence, but Sir Nicholas laughed.

"Sophy, do get the child to bed before she fancies ghosts in this house." He gestured around him at the immensity of Everett Hall. "You would have quite a run if you fancied the Hag amid these walls!"

I did not like to confess, and would never have confessed to Sir Nicholas, that these hallowed and stately halls were enough to send anyone into the vapors, even a ghost like the Hag, and if I had never heard of such a creature, I should still imag-

ine her or something very like her in such a distinguished house. She would roam those halls to make me feel my place, if for no other reason. In short, I did not feel at home here, any more than I should have in the Prince Regent's apartments!

But by the time I would have found a suitable setdown for my host, he was gone, and Sophia Hardwicke put out her substantial black-clad arm.

"Lean upon this, mum. His Ludship's right as right. We've no call keeping you from your rest. Else the porker is to be burnt to a cinder and the household does not sup this night."

"Dear me," added Ezra Hardwicke in his suave way, suggesting to me all sorts of sly deviltry, "we must not, in any circumstances, let young Miss go hungry, or without rest. She will need all her strength if she means to challenge the Hag."

"That'll do, man!" said his wife as I shivered, and she and I moved in a gingerly way across the room and out into the gallery. I had hopped along during most of our progress, so when we started up the great curving staircase, I put my weight upon my toes and we managed very well.

I was almost too tired to pay much attention to my surroundings as we crossed the corridor on the floor above, but I knew how Mama would like a description of all this luxury, so I tried to make out some detail in my surroundings. But I was so tired that I made out only that it was decorated in the very height of elegance, although a trifle behind the latest fashion and, to judge by the little

carved hall table we passed, in need of a good housewifely dusting.

The room into which I was ushered had much the quality of that part of Everett Hall which I had already glimpsed—elegantly furnished but disused. I suspected that the used sections of the hall were those masculine quarters I had not yet seen, for this bedchamber was entirely feminine, like the summer room, and while flawlessly decorated, with windows opening wide upon the moor and sky, had the look of a room unchanged since before the turn of our nineteenth century.

I wondered that Sir Nicholas was not lonely here in this great house, which he must often have dreamed of sharing with the woman he had loved, Megan Sedley Kelleher. How he must hate Patrick for this wrecking of his life! And as for Mrs. Sedley, whose snobbery and ambition had brought about the tragedy, I no longer wondered at his dislike of her but only marveled that his feeling was not stronger.

Mrs. Hardwicke would have removed my clothing almost bodily, but I was used to doing for myself and only accepted gratefully a lavender-scented dressing sack from a lovely old carved chest at the foot of the four-poster bed. By the time she had established me on a flowered chaise, Ezra Hardwicke brought in a ewer of steaming hot water and set it beside my foot. I was relieved when they left me alone, though I could not deny their kindness. But beneath that kindness I could not

help feeling undercurrents of watchful waiting. I remembered always that the Hag's Head, which they thought I intended to purchase, might go back to them, its original owners, if no one else saw fit to buy it in the near future. They might even assume that any money they had laid away would purchase, just so long as I did not snatch it from them first. Certainly, the tales of the ghostly visitant lowered the asking price of the inn. I suspected that was Mrs. Sedley's chief concern in selling so cheaply.

There were moments during this time when the two Hardwickes were fussing about me that I was ashamed of my thoughts. But then came such a remark as was made at their departure, to set me thinking again. I had been so busy observing the grand life of the nobility and wondering how they solved such practical matters as keeping foods hot though all these endless galleries, that I quite banished my worries about that ghostly Hag's Head. Immediately after, as Mrs. Hardwicke was closing the door and nudging her husband out of the room, she stuck her head back in and said cheerfully, "Indeed, lass, you'll find nothing to fret you in these halls. The Hag must get through those grounds out beneath that set of windows at your elbow, afore ever you'll meet her within."

"Has anyone ever met the Hag within these walls?" I asked ironically.

"But Miss," put in Ezra Hardwicke softly, "how came Miss Elspeth to take Everett Hall so very

much in dislike, eh? Something that followed in her very path, her very footsteps, all the way from the Hag's Head! Still and all, Miss Elspeth is very likely given to strong imaginings; isn't it so, Wife?"

"Come away!" said his wife severely.

I heard Ezra Hardwicke chuckle as the door closed, leaving me with no very pleasant thoughts.

Was any of this true, I asked myself, or was it a sort of backhand slap at me, to frighten me off the purchase? The more they tried by such scurvy means to alarm me, the more determined I became to have the Hag's Head as my property. Putting my foot into the hot water, then jerking it out painfully, for the water was scalding, I considered what I would do if I ever did own the old inn. First of all, of course, I would have it cleaned in every corner, every cupboard, from eaves to basements. Then I would see that air and strong light reached into all shadowy corners. I had never yet encountered a legend about ghosts that did not consign them to shadows and unclean places.

Yes, but what if there was something—some odd phenomenon that did exist in fact, not in fancy? I had the evidence of my own eyes and the dying gaze of Macrae. And perhaps even more chilling, there was the strange imagined face in Seven Spinney that had so frightened Timothy and me. I relied very strongly upon the evidence of the little cat's senses. Were not cats supposed to be, somehow, more aware of such apparitions?

Even Sir Nicholas and Jacob, his loader, insisted that no dogs were ever to be found in Seven Spinney. That was odd, but all of a piece with what had happened to me since the moment Timmy and I set foot inside the common room of the Hag's Head Inn.

The water in the ewer now seemed a trifle less apt to scald the flesh off me, so I dipped my foot in, toe by toe as it were, and felt the ache gradually leave my foot until it seemed nearly normal. I spent these minutes looking around with great admiration at the furnishings of the room, as well as the room itself, all in the last style of elegance, its beautifully paneled light walls, its dainty bed with ruffle trim, and the curtains, similarly ruffled, which did not cut the light from the windows but rather expanded it.

This brought my thoughts to the weather outside and the fabulous view from my post on this comfortale chaise. I could see far across the rolling moor, and I fancied I could make out the chimney tops of the Hag's Head and, somewhat nearer, the dark declivity in the moors where a little stream trickled along, eternally shadowed by a tangle of trees, the whole of it called Seven Spinney. How curious that I had seen that odd imaginary thing within the glade which my thoughts had twisted and shaped into the face of an old crone! I wondered now what it had really been. Probably similar to the fancies Elspeth Sedley had had when

she paid her visit here, which produced in her such a dislike of Everett Hall.

It must be very dark in Seven Spinney at this hour of the late afternoon, with the whole moorland world lying under the uniformly gray skies, which dripped a mizzling rain. The colorless sky had an odd effect upon the world outside these windows, seeming to bring out the deep green of the copse called Seven Spinney, the mauve and dun color of the dying heather, and the enormous sea of green that was the moor itself, swarming with so much unseen animal and insect life, yet strangely still to the sight.

The sky at this time of day lulled me to a sleepiness not at all usual for me. Or perhaps it was caused by the monotonous rolling moors that I stared at, imagining all sorts of creatures alive and peopling the view before me; but it was singularly bereft of human signs. My eyes closed briefly. When I discovered this disgraceful weakness, I opened my eyes wide and stared intently at the view from my borrowed windows. I had one or two more near temptations to sleep, but I managed to fend them off by concentrating upon finding some live thing upon the moor.

And then I did find it. What a liar that insufferable Sir Nicholas was! Telling me first that no dog of his ever visited Seven Spinney, and second that no one else's dogs were permitted upon the heath in that region; for I could dimly see some sort of dun-colored animal prowling across the

moor, apparently unafraid of potholes and boggy patches. As I watched, I began to realize that the animal was headed toward Everett Hall. Worse and worse! Exactly what Sir Nicholas had said was not possible.

I blinked, trying to throw off sleep, and leaned forward to watch this curious animal whose habits were denied by everyone at Everett Hall. Its approach was slow, deliberate, not so much creeping along in canine or feline fashion, but huddled against the slap of rain and wind. There was an almost human look to the stature and movements of the creature. My eyes, which had closed in spite of all my good intentions, snapped open, and I felt the first nibble of a new fear when the sight of that peculiar, indistinct creature began to prey upon my senses. I told myself, *This is no hunting dog, no vicious hound that snarls on the trail of a poor fox or a girl like Kathleen Bodmun.*

No. It was something else, but I refused to name it. I only wondered why someone at the Hall did not see it and make some signal, go out to stable or corral or kennel the beast, for surely its approach was being watched by someone at the Hall other than myself.

I seemed to doze off as I watched, but this was so unusual that I wondered if I was truly ill and not merely relieving a pulled muscle in my foot. The chilling of the water in the ewer upon my foot aroused me. I dried my foot on the towel left by Mrs. Hardwicke, marveling at how much these

older people Mama's age knew about such simple cures for the sickening pain I had suffered an hour or two before.

When I had finished with my foot and folded the towel, I listened, amazed at the quietness in this great household. At home I would have heard a hundred different friendly, companionable noises both in the high road outside and within our household at this hour. But here in Everett Hall it was as though the whole world of the moors reached out to shroud the manor house in a silence I found abnormal.

Confused by the few minutes I had closed my eyes, I almost forgot to look out the windows upon the carefully formal garden and park of Everett Hall, then beyond to the endless rolling moors now blurring into obscurity in the sunless sunset, and once more to catch sight of that peculiar creature moving toward the Hall, much closer now and less like a great hound. I would have taken it for a human being, except that it moved so very bent over, huddled against the drizzling heavens and against old age. In short, an old crone, a witch-like hag!

I must be dreaming still. I got up and limped to the windows to get the closest possible look at the queer thing I had seen. At the very gates of the Hall it seemed to vanish, swallowed up in the general gray dusk, which crept up from the moors, higher and higher, so that with surprising speed the darkness engulfed my windows as well.

I was still puzzling this out when there was a brisk rap upon the door. Before I could say, "Enter," Sir Nicholas strode in, completely ignoring the amenities, for I was, after all, wearing somebody or other's dressing sack, which may have been voluminous in the style of 1780 but was emphatically not a thing in which to receive gentlemen!

The difficulty between me and Sir Nicholas, I decided at that moment, was that he would not take me seriously as a woman. When he walked over to me, he behaved exactly as my father might have, with no consideration for the dignity of my eighteen years. Such an attitude only made me more determined than ever to purchase the Hag's Head Inn or, at the very least, show my grownup skill at bargaining for it.

"Well now, I trust you are feeling more the thing. How is that lively little foot? More lively and less painful than when last we met, I trust."

"It was nothing. I scarcely noticed it," I lied, remembering to concentrate upon dignity and self-assurance.

He smiled and held out his hand. I was confused by the gesture and surprised when he reached for my foot on the chaise and, squeezing it in a very businesslike and unromantic manner, asked me if it hurt. I winced but was impressed by a definite improvement, for the pain was more a remembered thing than actual.

"Stand up," he bade me.

I did so, now quite at my ease before him as I

put my weight upon that foot, feeling the first stabbing, fiery pain give away to an ache that was at worst bearable.

"Excellent," said Sir Nicholas. "You may come down to dinner."

"Oh, but I cannot," I protested quickly. "If I can walk, I must return to Maidenmoor. Mrs. Sedley will be very worried, for she cannot know what has happened to me."

"You need have no concern on that score. I sent Jacob off to relate to that woman the tale of your harrowing encounter with my savage dogs."

"You need not make me a figure of fun. It *was* savage dogs, or something very like," I assured him with spirit. "And what is more, I saw it again, just now."

He seemed to be teasing me; yet I could not but suspect that he was more intrigued by my remark than he pretended.

"I'm sure that you did. Where was this? In one of the old armoires, I don't doubt. A ghostly apparition that disappeared in a clap of thunder."

"No, sir. Out those windows. Down on the moor."

He went over to the windows and looked out upon the carefully tended park of Everett Hall with all its stately trees in precise formations and the carriage drive swept clean of all the debris blown upon it during the day's fierce wind.

"Where was this guytrash who pursued you?"

I limped over to him and looked down upon the park and then beyond to the Hall gates and the open moor, which was now scarcely visible in the darkness.

"Well, of course you can't see it now! It is dark out!"

"Very true. However, if you saw this monster dog howling at the gates out there, you must have seen it within the house since then; for it is certainly not there now." A nasty thought, that what I had seen out there, huddled against the elements, looking for all the world like an an old hag, was locked within these walls with us.

I was just drawing myself up to resume this argument when he smiled at me and offered me his arm. "If your foot is feeling more the thing, suppose I show you about the Hall and assure you, once and for all time, that we do not harbor monsters and other skulking creatures behind doors or in powder closets."

I was just about to accept his escort, being anxious to see as much of Everett Hall as possible and assuring myself that what I had seen was not here hiding somewhere, when I looked down at my low-cut, square-necked robe, horribly embarrassed. I remembered that I was not dressed for dinner at a great Hall or for a stroll with a baronet or, indeed, for the company of any male. Sir Nicholas, who seemed to have a disconcerting habit of guessing my thoughts, told me to sit down, went to the big

chest at the foot of the bed, and threw out handfuls of finery that was exquisite, though out of the mode at present. He tossed me a wide ribbon sash of lilac-watered silk, which I looked at much puzzled, for I did not see how this would save the day. He tossed me some lilac slippers, which fitted tolerably well, though a trifle cramping to my toes, and he ended by finding a smaller lilac ribbon, which I rightly guessed was for the hair.

I asked him to leave me to my own devices, but he gathered up his various finds and while I protested indistinctly, telling him I would not be putting him to this bother, he swung me around and bound the big sash around my waist, letting the streamers fall in the back. It transformed the dressing sack into an elegant lilac-sprigged gown, and I was vastly pleased with myself when he pushed me rudely over to the long pier glass in one corner of the room.

My hair, of course, was impossible. Dried now, it was still snarled and badly needed brushing. I fumbled around for a brush, but before I could find one, Sir Nicholas came up behind my mirrored image and began to brush my hair down, smoothing it, after each brush stroke, with the flat of his hand. I watched his reflection in the mirror, marveling that he was so skillful. I felt exactly the way Timothy looked when I stroked him, blissfully content and purring. During those few minutes I nearly forgot the thing I had fancied I saw

approaching Everett Hall across the heath, the thing that must be within these walls at this very moment, I thought, unless I had dreamed the whole of it.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

SIR NICHOLAS took the narrower ribbon, threaded it through my hair above my forehead, and tied it at the nape of my neck while I enjoyed the sensation of being the focus of the busy man's attention. He had by no means abandoned his brusque superiority, however, and his first comment after bidding me to look at myself in the glass was typical of him. It was one of those remarks whose truth I feared while at the same time wondering if this was his notion of humor.

"Now then, I think you look respectable enough not to disgrace either Everett Hall or me at dinner. Come along."

I started to make objections, fearing what the servants would say, the tales they would carry into Heatherton and Maidenmoor, but he merely repeated, "Come along, I say. I detest being made tardy, as you have made me."

"I!" I began heatedly, but took the arm he extended and, with only one brief glance at the black out of doors, I limped out into the hall, trying with all my might to appear as sophisticated and worldly as my situation warranted. It was not easy for the upper gallery was shrouded in warm, flickering

shadows between the branches of candles, and several times during our progress I was startled enough to grasp his arm tighter, hoping he did not notice what I had just imagined I saw beyond those shadows.

I had never known a person could have so many grandpapas or such a collection of haughty aristocrats to crush all the pretensions of an outlander yeoman's daughter like myself. I was amazed that Sir Nicholas could take so much time out of his crowded day to entertain me, as I conceived it, for I had obviously spoiled his hunting and probably interfered with any number of the pursuits in which gentlemen usually indulged. Yet I could not but feel that Sir Nicholas enjoyed these few minutes out of his busy day, and I was well aware of the compliment implied in his expenditure of time in the company of a casual acquaintance like myself, whom he had always patently disliked.

"How is the foot?" he asked presently, thus impressing me again with the good manners of the gentry. After this night, despite Sir Nicholas's abrupt way with me, I told myself I would always remember his concern for my injury and the effort he expended to make me look my best. Then with my Cornish suspicion of any gift given without expectation of payment, I thought it was more probable that he had carefully arranged my gown and hair so that I might be worthy of Everett Hall and not disgrace him at dinner.

My head began to ache with trying to remember

all these family connections long before we had completed the recitation and study of all the ancient Everetts. When he showed me the portrait of his brother who had been the last baronet before Sir Nicholas, I was busy thinking of what a triumph it must have been for Sir Nicholas to show Mrs. Sedley and the world his new dignity.

I remarked, without thinking of the causes that gave him the properties and fortune, "Weren't you exceedingly happy to acquire your title, sir?"

He considered the portrait of his brother thoughtfully. It was a splendid figure of a man, much jollier than Sir Nicholas, not so dark-eyed or somber, gloriously decked out in his navy captain's uniform.

"No. I was not. You see, I loved my brother George very much. We grew up as companions, neither of us caring for our uncle's title. For many years it was supposed that we should have a cousin who would succeed to the title. Then uncle died suddenly of a chill after a day's shooting on the moors, and George became the baronet. Three months later, George was dead on the quarterdeck of his ship. It was off Cape Trafalgar." He looked away from the portrait abruptly. "It was a sickening thing, and happened close upon another—deep wound. For a while I was very bitter."

"I'm so sorry," I murmured, feeling like an idiot for having so badly expressed myself. "Of course you would not rejoice over the title. And

Mrs. Sedley told me how she wronged you in . . . another matter."

He smiled, the only tender smile I had ever seen upon his face, and it was amazing how it softened all the severely handsome lineaments of his face. My heart, heretofore blissfully unaware of the physical complications of love, began to beat in a very odd and stifling way. I could not be so silly as to "throw my cap" at such an unattainable nobleman, but I could at least enjoy these attentions of his and promise myself not to let him anger me so easily as he often did.

"Yes," he said. "I was sure Clara Sedley would relive the entire affair for your benefit, although frankly, I should prefer to forget it, if it were not for my conviction that Megan's murderer still hangs about the district, hoping to make off with Megan's little fortune."

"Her fortune!" Could this be what the Macraes and even Patrick found so fascinating about the Hag's Head?

"Megan wished to buy the inn from her mother. She had amassed a sizeable box of coins and paper, roughly several hundred guineas, and spoke often of the money. I warned her, but it was useless. Women!" He condemned us all out of hand with that single word pronounced as bitterly as an epithet.

As we moved along the gallery, he showed me brief glimpses of the other rooms on this floor, but

I thought the bedchamber he had assigned to me was the prettiest and most comfortable of them all. There was nothing romantically dashing about him, no matter how kind he was to devote all his valuable time to me, his totally uninvited guest, and I was constantly aware that there were mysterious depths to his personality that no other person would ever know. I would catch his dark eyes glancing at me, as though weighing the kind of person I truly was, and it made me nervous. Yet I was oddly disappointed when we went down the great staircase and saw Mrs. Hardwicke waiting for us by the elegant newel post in the ground-floor entrance hall.

Sir Nicholas murmured, "Too bad. I daresay she has something unpleasant to relate—she looks so self-satisfied."

"May I speak to you, sir? Certain—guests have arrived," Mrs. Hardwicke announced.

Sir Nicholas's dark eyebrows arched.

"Are we expecting guests other than Miss Bodmun?"

"Not as I'd be knowing, Your Worship. I think it was because Mistress Sedley heard Young Miss was here. She and Miss Elspeth come hard on the track of notice from Jacob."

"I have a painful feeling that our pleasant and promising evening is ruined," he remarked to me, thus flattering me enormously. Then he added in resigned tones, "Very well. See to it that Mrs. Sedley has the green chamber and Miss Elspeth the

one next to her. And send them all down to dinner as soon as possible, or Miss Kathleen will be starved. Isn't it so, Miss Kate?"

"Oh, yes! I am excessively hungry."

Somewhat to my surprise, Sir Nicholas laughed at this perfectly honest answer, and after eliciting my promise to play the hostess, he settled me in the room adjoining the less imposing of two dining salons, an old-fashioned Jacobean study, dark with leather, but glowing in the light from the big, blackened fireplace. He poured me a glass of Madeira, assuring me it was of excellent quality, having been smuggled in from the Continent during the late wars with France. I was not a connoisseur of wines and found it pleasing to the taste, which was all I cared about. I did not like to tell Sir Nicholas, but the truth was that during my life I had become much more familiar with the smugglers on the Cornish Coast than with their product.

After a few sips of the wine I felt myself surprisingly mellowed, enough so that when Elspeth and an upstairs maid helped Mrs. Sedley into the little study, there to await our host, I scarcely knew myself for that bumbling girl of the moors who had run from what Sir Nicholas assured me was a mere figment of my imagination. One recurring thought did bother me now and then: If Sir Nicholas possibly could be wrong, then that same weird creature whom I saw approaching the gates of the hall today at dusk was closeted somewhere in the great house, and at this very moment. But the

arrival of Mrs. Sedley effectively banished those haunting thoughts.

Although Elspeth Sedley's lovely features were more sullen than ever, her grandmother seemed extraordinarily pleased with herself as she was carefully seated with her back to the crackling fire.

"How very comfortable it is to be here. I'm sure I have remarked it times without number. Have I not, Elspeth?"

"Times without number."

"And to think of my little girl as mistress of this house!" She drew out a lacy handkerchief and dabbed ineffectually at her eyes.

I had risen and curtseyed as the older lady entered, just as I had been taught, but I could see from the look Elspeth gave me that she thought me fearfully antique in my manners, which was amusing; for I had heard at great length about Elspeth's elegant last-century ways. Nevertheless, I felt a little foolish, though I remained standing in order to carry out Sir Nicholas's orders that I should perform as his hostess.

"May I offer you some Madeira, ma'am?"

Mrs. Sedley frowned ever so slightly, waved her handkerchief at Elspeth, and said to her, "But what are you about, girl? Will you force our guest to take over your own tasks? Dear Kate, so sweet of you to volunteer, but after all, it is my naughty Elspeth's responsibility."

Elspeth moved over to the sideboard but I held doggedly to the task assigned me by Sir Nicholas.

"It's quite all right," I said, pretending to misunderstand Mrs. Sedley. "Sir Nicholas asked me to make you comfortable until he arrives."

"Really!" said Mrs. Sedley. "I am persuaded you have not understood him correctly."

Elspeth looked from one to the other of us unsmiling, with her heavy-lidded eyes shadowed so that I could not imagine what she was thinking.

"And where may our host be, my dear?" Mrs. Sedley pursued the matter.

"I believe he is speaking to the cook about dinner. Will you have Madeira, ma'am?"

"No, dear." Mrs. Sedley rose magnificently to the occasion of my discomfiture. "My granddaughter knows what I like. Elspeth—if you please."

Defeated, I was forced to step aside while Elspeth moved to the sideboard, found a crystal decanter, and poured a glass of what appeared to be sherry, offering it to her grandmother, who, it seemed to me, did not appreciate it now that she had gone to considerable trouble to obtain her special wine. Elspeth herself took Madeira and stood there observing me from beneath her long eyelashes. I had a nasty feeling that she would have looked the same way at a peculiarly revolting insect.

Partly to break out of the self-consciousness she induced in me, and partly because I could not forget the odd and disturbing things I had seen on the moors today, I said to Elspeth, "I have been

told recently that you were followed by some odd creature when you last visited Everett Hall."

I had not miscalculated. This remark was quite enough to change the direction of Elspeth's thoughts as well as to arouse her grandmother.

"What absolute nonsense!" said the older woman, greatly upset. "Such fancies are best found between the covers of Mrs. Radcliffe's romances. Where could you possibly have heard that tale? Certainly not from dear Nicholas, who, I am sure, would make much point of denying it."

"The housekeeper told me."

Mrs. Sedley was about to go more thoroughly into her severe opinion of Mrs. Hardwicke's mental capacity, when Elspeth laughed. "Grandmama, when I expressed my own feeling about Mrs. Hardwicke you were quick enough to tell me how wrong I was. Please be more consistent. The truth is"—she faced me, pouring herself more Madeira without even looking at the decanter or the glass—"I did see something follow me across the moor from the Hag's Head, and since that time I have not been in the least anxious to visit this place. . . . I keep thinking that 'it' won't approve."

"It?" I echoed uneasily.

"Whatever it is that appears to trouble so many different people."

"You think the Hall is haunted?" I asked seriously.

"My dear!" protested Mrs. Sedley, but in vain; for Elspeth contradicted me only in part.

"Not the Hall, but the Hag's Head." She peered into her glass, but I do not think she saw its contents. "It is some—feeling . . . something not right, which everyone notices at the inn. As though it is not really empty at all. And when you leave the inn, you take with you that aura of another presence. Frankly, Kate, I can't imagine your wishing to purchase the inn. It is downright unhealthy."

Sir Nicholas's voice cut into this chilling monologue. "I too hope Miss Kate takes your advice, though I shall think her an absolute little fool if she chooses your reasons."

"What a way to speak of our young visitor," murmured Mrs. Sedley, exactly as she must have coquetted thirty years before. "How do you go on, Nicholas, my dear boy?"

"Exceedingly well, thank you." Sir Nicholas bowed over her hand, kissing it with the flourish she expected, but I was curious to note that Elspeth not only did not appreciate his manner, which may, of course, have been ironic, but upon her face was an expression of active dislike. Such was the influence of Patrick Kelleher, I had no doubt. It seemed odd to me, though, because I could enjoy Patrick's charm and yet give it its due value, such as it was, without ceasing to admire other people. If only Sir Nicholas would always be as kind to me as he had during the past hour! But I felt sure he would be returning soon to the sardonic woman-hating gentleman I first met in the Hag's

Head Inn. Or was it, indeed, the malign effect the inn had upon all who entered?

"But what is this?" Sir Nicholas asked, and to my embarrassment, turned to chide me. "Has not my young friend seen to your wants? I see you carrying the decanter, Elspeth."

Even Elspeth had the grace to flush at this cutting little setdown.

"She intended to, but Grandmama . . ."

"Ah, yes," said Sir Nicholas. "I was sure my dear old friend Mrs. Sedley would be in it somewhere."

There followed a certain amount of small talk, chiefly between Mrs. Sedley and our host, and when we all adjourned to the small summer dining room, Mrs. Sedley, as her natural right, indicated that the Hardwickes should help her to the hostess's chair at the foot of the long table. It was all so elegant—the service, the epergne in the center of the table, the lovely slim candles in their scones, and the napery heavily laced—that I was much relieved to let her play the hostess and to sit where I was placed at Sir Nicholas's left, with a reluctant Elspeth, who shrank from his touch, on the right. I was careful to mind my manners and behave exactly as Mama and Father had taught me, but this did not make it any easier to exchange light banter as the others did.

Sir Nicholas made several attempts but cried off when I blurted out little truths that seemed to amuse him but aroused disdain in the others. In-

evitably, the matter of today's curious happenings cropped up again as I said, "Excuse me, sir. . . ."

"By all means. You have not strung two words together since we sat to dinner."

"Then, if Elspeth and I have imagined the whole of these odd apparitions wandering across the heath, would you tell us, sir, what they truly are?"

"Quite simple. An overactive imagination. You expected to see something of the sort and therefore you have seen it. But Mrs. Sedley has not expected, nor desired, to see any such thing, and like me, she has not seen them."

"Indeed, you express it delightfully, Nicholas."

Mrs. Sedley beamed down the table at her host, who spoiled this new understanding by adding, "This is not to be taken for an endorsement of the sale of Megan's inn. Except to me. A good healthy burning is its greatest need."

I felt uneasy when he pronounced the name of the girl who had been the great love of his life, but Mrs. Sedley, whose daughter Megan had been, seemed much more anxious about the sale of the abandoned inn than the tragedy to Megan. I could not but sense that Sir Nicholas had felt more deeply the death of his beloved Megan Sedley than had Megan's mother.

"I have said, and I shall continue to observe, that those flickering lights observed on the moor and those trifling sounds within are merely what one can expect of a disused house."

"Yes," said I brightly, "but then, what did Ma-

crae and I see upon the staircase that killed the poor man?"

Mrs. Sedley rose from her chair at the foot of the table as we stared at her in astonishment; for we had not known that she could stand so straight without help. She asked drily, "Is this true? Macrae dead . . . for such a reason?"

It was dreadful. Mrs. Sedley stood there swaying, putting much weight upon the balls of her fingers and looking excessively white.

"She would never—do such a thing!"

As Nicholas sprang to help her, Elspeth and I gasped at the picture conjured up, the ghostly face that I remembered so well and so painfully, and with which, apparently, Elspeth too was acquainted. I wondered when she had seen the ghost and whether she truly felt that there was something very sinister about the thing that had staggered across the moor to the Hall, hunched and hidden. In plain fact, I felt that my old Hag phantom had been seen very vividly by Elspeth.

I did not know, however, what particular remark or fear or memory had aroused Mrs. Sedley to this desperate pitch. Mrs. Sedley looked up at Sir Nicholas, her pale eyes wide as she stared at him.

"It is not true, you know. *I did not* . . . She would never say I did. . . ." And to Elspeth's and my horror, she toppled over against Sir Nicholas.

CHAPTER TWELVE

I WAS SO concerned over what had happened to Mama's old friend that I did not reflect until later upon either her peculiar words or the ease with which Sir Nicholas came to everyone's rescue. He helped her to her chair, directed me crisply to bring water from my place setting, let her sip that while he sopped up the spilled water from her own glass, and generally cosseted Mrs. Sedley until the housekeeper and Elspeth got her into a guest room on the ground floor.

Since it was quite late for me by this time, I suggested that perhaps when Mrs. Sedley was recovered somewhat, we should borrow a horse and carriage and drive back to Maidenmoor, where she could be comfortable. This did not go down well at all, however. Elspeth, who showed signs of wanting to agree with me, had her grandmother's hand pressing tightly into hers so that she could not release herself, and she confessed that her grandmother's attacks did not permit her to move about or be jounced in a carriage for several hours. I was about to suggest then that I go home myself, for I conceived that Sir Nicholas would be furious with all of us for cluttering up his home.

And it would all be my fault, for I had begun it. But to my surprise, he was as adamant about that as about every other order he ever laid down.

"What a little gudgeon you are! Trotting back that long way to the village just to inconvenience everyone at the Hall! Come now, be sensible and stay."

He seemed so cross about it, and looked so casually at me, that I wished with all my heart that I had never allowed myself to be carried here in the first place. But it was done now, and I could only agree and let myself be escorted back to that charming room abovestairs and told that I must not disturb anyone until after dawn, because they all "needed their sleep."

Since this came from Sir Nicholas, with one of his smiles, I did not know whether to laugh in answer or pretend to ignore it. It was very lowering, though, to be talked to like that, and my only consolation was that Sir Nicholas himself had escorted me to my room while delegating the servants to care for the other ladies. I hoped no one heard his rude and typical remark to me. I could not even remember the last time anyone had called me a "little gudgeon"; for Mama was in the habit of regarding me as quite grown-up, and Father was wont to say, "Do as you choose, but leave me to my accounts. And as for coinage, you must look to your Mama for that."

But as Sir Nicholas said good night to me, he kissed my hand exactly as he had done with Mrs.

Sedley in the summer dining room, and I could not but be impressed. I do not know if he did the same for Elspeth or not, and I did not want to know.

My foot ached a little under the arch when I closed the door of my comfortable bedchamber and began to prepare for a night's sleep. Sir Nicholas need not have made such a point of my keeping others from their sleep, for I had been through rather more than he during this day, what with the death of poor Master Macrae, the owner of the Owl of York Tavern, and then the curious and alarming pursuit by that beast I had seen in Seven Spinney. And if that were not all, there was the strange prowler I had seen outside the Hall gates before dinner, which I had nearly convinced myself was hiding within the walls of Everett Hall at this moment.

This thought made me turn back to the door seeking a bolt that might protect me from unwanted intruders, but there was a mere latch, which I had already used and which had proved singularly easy for Sir Nicholas to use before dinner.

I limped over and looked out between the drawn portieres at the enormity of the Heatherton Moor beyond the precise plantings of Everett Hall. At this time of the evening nothing was to be seen except the little glowing patches cast upon the garden below by the lights from my window. Beyond the garden and the Hall gates nothing was visible except the kind of imagined darkness that is half

darkness and half starlight, illuminating only the occasional sprig of heather or clump of gorse that one always fancied must grow in that particular spot; for by daylight, as I well knew when I remembered my home country, I would never be able to tell for a certainty which bushes I had picked out as having cast the long, haunting shadows.

I knew perfectly well as I studied this scene that nothing either human or ghostly was out there except the dying heather, the moorland, and the prickly furze bushes of the heath; yet if I stayed here much longer, I knew I should imagine some menacing thing rising out of those shadows to terrify me.

As I dropped the portieres together again and set about preparing for the best washing I could manage in the steaming pewter basin of water provided, and then put on my shift, which was now dried and pressed and spread on the turned-down bed, I wondered about Mrs. Sedley's curious behavior at dinner. She had seemed quite herself, urging me to purchase the Hag's Head and speaking as though Elspeth and I were full of preposterous imaginings when we mentioned the odd things we had seen. Yet when I returned to the story of Macrae's death, which had certainly been induced by his vision of that face upon the staircase landing, she had babbled out things that made no sense.

Getting into bed, I was expecting the comfort of a warmer. You may imagine my shivers upon a chilly autumn night to find that this hospitable

touch had been neglected. However, it would not be the first time that such a thing had happened to me, and after shivering for a few minutes, I found the stiff sheets and warm coverlet more than adequate. I reached over and snuffed out the candles thinking to have a long and welcome night's sleep.

By one of nature's absurdly painful jokes, the minute I closed my eyes my foot began to ache. I thought very hard about pleasant things, but all the horrors of the day crowded in upon me. How could I possibly go home without making the purchase that would give me my future, not to mention satisfying Father, who never ceased to worry over my obstinacy in refusing two marriage proposals? I need not buy the Hag's Head, though no others had presented themselves thus far. Perhaps that was Mrs. Sedley's doing. She would not wish me to see anything more presentable than her own unused property.

As I lay in this strange bed with my eyes closed, my thoughts, almost despite myself, drifted across the rolling moor to that lonely heap of ruins where murder had been done. I thought that if only it were not haunted, it had several of the very features I sought. It was a bargain in the matter of price; it had enough bedchambers; it had good kitchen facilities; and it was just far enough from the village to keep the young ladies out of reach of the temptations of the town.

But was the old road to the Hag's Head in reasonable repair for any kind of use? Sir Nicholas

had taken me back to Maidenmoor on that road; yet I had become hopelessly lost today searching for the same road. It was puzzling to know which way to move, if no other building offered itself for my purpose. And I would dearly love to flout the autocratic Sir Nicholas by making the purchase he was so very anxious to prevent.

Just before drifting off into a half-sleep I remember that I wondered how far Sir Nicholas Everett would go to stop me from purchasing that useless, ill-starred old inn. What could he possibly want with it or its destruction?

I was used to the night-long noises of a market town at home, and last night I had heard hourly chimes from the church next door to Sedley House, so that the silence in this great building, combined with the dull, nagging ache of my foot, soon awoke me.

I fluffed up the pillow under my head and tried to think of pleasant things, but the effect of the hot water upon my foot had worn off, and I had to get out of bed and search in the dark for the pewter basin with which I had bathed earlier. The water was still warm, and I rubbed the muscles of my foot vigorously. The noise of my hand splashing water in the dark seemed so loud in the night silence that I felt it must disturb everyone in Everett Hall. For this reason I was not surprised when I heard dogs barking on the grounds below my window, and I peeked out between the portieres.

Someone I did not at first recognize was hurrying across the grounds toward the cacophony.

"Be still now! Still, I say!" It was Ezra Hardwicke, hurrying stiff-legged through the carefully pruned trees and shrubs to the dogs, who pulled at their chains, tugging and swinging the metal against the stone walk. I assumed that their kennels were close by and that the chains allowed them only this much freedom. They grew more and more frantic, and I began to wonder what was troubling them. I knew something of dogs, and they were certainly not carrying on this commotion without reason. Ezra Hardwicke reached the dogs, a little to one side of my windows, and began to strike at them with his cane, a vain and inadequate weapon entirely.

"Down! You scoundrel, that will do!"

While I was wondering when he would realize he had gone about the business stupidly, I heard Sir Nicholas's well-known voice in the doorway below me, to my left, and lamplight flashed across the garden from that door.

"Leave them, Ezra. And for God's sake, be silent! You send them into a frenzy."

I pushed open the window, exceedingly curious to know what had caused all this commotion and how Sir Nicholas, who never let himself be defeated, would handle this noisy little scuffle. He was a very knowledgeable man and would think of something. He had no weapon, and though the

stars were covered over by a gathering of storm clouds, he was still in his well-fitted dinner clothes, with no outer wrap.

"Here, Mealy! Down, love. And you, Poacher. What a voice you have!" He clapped his hands, and the dogs bounded up to him as far as their chains would permit, fierce enough to eat him, I thought. But it seemed that they were only frolicking now that their master had come upon the scene.

"Careful, sir. He'll savage you. Have a care," Hardwicke warned him, backing off precipitously.

"What a fool you are!" was the only thanks he received, and just the sort of thing I might have expected Sir Nicholas to say. He managed to subdue the dogs, who, though ceasing to bark, still whined and suggested, to me at least, that something was amiss.

"But sir, they were quite ferocious," Hardwicke ventured, as extenuation of his own retreat.

Sir Nicholas was examining the jaws of one of the dogs, remarking as though Hardwicke had not spoken, "He has a cut here across the muzzle. How did it happen?"

Poor Ezra looked as though he would tear his thin hair. "But, sir, why did the dogs behave so strangely? Surely not—"

"The storm, perhaps. That isn't important. I will not have them mistreated. You know that."

"What did they see?" shouted Ezra.

"Be silent. Leave this to me. Go inside."

The servant must have fought out his fight, for I heard a door slam, and not too long after that, having quieted the dogs, Sir Nicholas disappeared. I did not know where.

Very much puzzled by these developments, I closed the window as silently as possible and got back into bed.

But now the house was no longer silent, and as for me, I was prey to as many quick, nagging little moments of puzzlement as there were odd sounds. I tried to sort them out—the creak of timbers in the changing temperatures, the stealthy footstep on the stairs or along the gallery outside my room—and still there was the uneasy rustling of the dogs' chains outside, below my windows. Ezra Hardwicke was right, and I was amazed that Sir Nicholas had not listened to him.

What had passed the dogs in the garden, and where had it gone?

I was still considering all the logical, normal explanations for these various sounds in a house that had been so still only half an hour before, when the rain began to fall, beginning much as it had yesterday on the heath, with a few big splashing drops, then a cloudburst, pelting the shrubbery below my windows and slanting across the windows themselves, rattling against the shutters, which were fastened back. A distant streak of lightning flashed faintly, and I waited with that nervous, interested suspense for the thunderclap to follow. These noises became so intense that

they completely blotted out the little betraying sounds that had nagged at my nerves only minutes before within the big house.

Worst of all, I began to think of poor Master Macrae, and from that moved on in my troubled suspicions to ask myself what Patrick Kelleher had done in the Hag's Head after he sent me on my way. Was it even possible that he had been the "creature" who dogged my steps in the Seven Spinney and whom I had caught a glimpse of amid all that foliage? But why would he have done such a thing?

I turned my thoughts toward home, wondering if, after all, I must look elsewhere for that school of ours. But Mama and Mrs. Sedley had been quite sure there was much more value placed upon education in this area than at home. Still, I had given Somersetshire only a cursory examination, what with Miss Higsby's sickness in the accommodation coach, and I had eliminated the counties nearer London only because we felt the competition would be too keen and the elegance too much to compete with.

Down the gallery a door creaked as it was opened. I wondered if Sir Nicholas's private apartments were on this floor. A lightning flash that struck quite close to the park gates of Everett Hall gave me a bit of a start and illuminated my room briefly, even through the portieres. As always, I clenched my teeth, waiting for the thunderclap. It was fully as shattering as I had expected it

to be. It was during this monstrous noise that I fancied I heard again, beneath the general disturbance of the storm, the closing of a door along the corridor. It did not trouble me. I assumed it was the same person I had heard a moment before, now returning to his room. But I marveled that this sound seemed closer. I could not help wondering how many of the household were normally housed on this floor, for the Sedleys were on the ground floor. It would have been vastly more unnerving if I had found that I was the sole inhabitant up here tonight.

There followed another thunderclap whose prelude of lightning had somehow eluded my consciousness, and I crawled snugly under the bedclothes, trying to close out the sound by a devious boring into pillows and sheets. Gradually, in the next few minutes, the sounds of the storm and of the house itself subsided to indistinct shufflings and creakings.

What odd premonition made me snap my eyes open later I have never known, for I was so barricaded by pillows that I could not have heard anything but the loudest thunderclap. I lay there covered in three directions by my defenses against noise, and without moving my body, I stared out of my cocoon toward the corridor wall across the room. All the dainty furnishings remained static, as innocent, yet as shadowy and full of whispers, as though each piece had a life of its own. It was an

eerie sensation, and I could only explain it by the presence of something that had brushed by them; yet I had not gone near that side of the room when I got up earlier to watch the altercation over the dogs.

Still motionless except for my eyes, I gazed over the full range of the room except those sectors just beyond my vision. The very sightest motion at the foot of the bed, almost like a faint breath, gave me a clue. There was a presence in the room with me, and my body seemed to stiffen and freeze with the horror of it, for it must be hovering at the foot of my bed.

A great clap of thunder on the moor was followed in short order by a lightning bolt that struck one of the entrance gates of the park, sending a single blaze of light into the room. I had turned my head cautiously at the sound of thunderclap, and now in the brief instant of illumination I made out a thing huddled there at the foot of my bed. It seemed transparent, made up of shadows and dust and a vague gray masklike face, as ancient as the moors, more ancient than the oldest creature I had ever known.

It was regarding me out of incredible black depths that were the shadowed sockets of eyes, and the fleshless fingers groped for me across the coverlet like enormous gray wood-spiders.

I dared not move, even to shiver. I felt that my life depended upon my rigid motionlessness.

The thunderclap that followed seconds after the revealing flash of lightning now saved me by its blessed noise. It was so loud and so near that I blinked instinctively, and somewhere in the darkness, which was deeper than ever after that single blaze of light, the Hag disappeared.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

When my eyes were able to focus upon all the objects in the room, or as much as I could see of them, without the blindness that had succeeded that lightning, I began to recover feeling in all my limbs like a person who has been frostbitten. I found that where I had felt ice in my veins, there was now a madly beating pulse and a powerful attack of nerves. Moving as lightly and silently as possible I swung my feet out of bed and stood up. It was difficult to balance on the sore muscles of my foot, and I nearly fell over. I held on to the bedpost and waited until I felt less shaken, less panic-stricken. When my mind was reasonably clear, I tried to concentrate upon exactly what I must do. Then, and only then, might I know what had truly happened.

Most important was to bring light into the room, and that without any immediate method of lighting my bedside candles. There was no firemaker handy or, of course, any hot coals in the fireplace. I pulled open the portieres, finding it strangely difficult with my fingers shaking so much. I had been right in my premonition that the Hag, whether real or phantom, was now gone from the room. I was

entirely alone, but in no better case than if I had found the Hag and grappled like a tigress with the evil thing. At least, then, I should have known for a certainty what it was that haunted me.

I ran across the room, felt for a bell cord to summon the servants, so anxious, beset by the devils of puzzlement and fear. But in the half-dark I could not find anything remotely like a bell cord.

Out in the gallery too it was dark as a pocket. No help to me in tracing whatever signs, if any, my Hag had left behind her. I could not even make out anything distinct in the long gallery by which to summon the huge household unless I screamed, thus terrorizing all those who might not yet have encountered the Hag. And they would certainly think me mad.

I started back to my room, where I resolved to dress and go downstairs to see if one of the Hardwickes might still be up.

It was perfectly obvious to me, even in my confused condition, that I could not have imagined or even dreamed the whole of what had terrorized me in the thirty hours I had been in Yorkshire. One by one, I ticked off in my head the weird encounters with the Hag that Sir Nicholas and Mrs. Sedley, though divergent on every other subject, united in dismissing as a mere puff of smoke. And in the case of the moorland prowler, Sir Nicholas suggested it was a large beast belonging, perhaps, to some isolated sheep farmer. What Macrae and I had seen in the Hag's Head, I reasoned, could

be induced by the delirium of Macrae's death throes upon my susceptibility to suggestion.

It remained for me to prove, certainly to myself, as well as to Sir Nicholas, that something genuine and not a figment out of a nightmare had appeared to me in this room tonight.

I scrambled to put on my freshly laundered clothing, briefly grateful to Mrs. Hardwicke and her staff for having done such a neat task. My sore foot was swollen, and I found it impossible to get my shoe on it, especially since the leather had shrunk and wrinkled from its soaking earlier in the day. Well then, I thought impatiently, my clean white stocking would have to serve that foot.

As silently as possible, I hurried to my door, opened it by slow stages, and was out in the gallery again. I was fairly sure that if the Hag was flesh and blood, she should be well away from here by this time, fearing I would scream the house down. But I had had several minutes in which to recover from the dreadful appearance of that creature, and I was now growing more and more angry at the indignity of being so scared by a mere Guy Fawkes Day mask—or so I began to reason it away.

But the hand, I remembered suddenly—those hideous, fleshless fingers creeping across the coverlet—were they too mere parts of a Guy Fawkes mask?

They can't be, I thought as I felt my way along the wall toward what must be, I hoped, the wide staircase that would lead me to parts of the house

that I might better recognize. *They were skeletal, and yet they moved, very like spider legs!*

In some dreadful, alive fashion, *they were real fingers!*

At that moment, very real, delicately fleshed fingers caught into my shoulder. I gasped out loud. The Hag had come back. It was behind me. It was . . .

"Is that you, Kathleen?"

"Y-yes. . . . And you?"

"Elspeth."

"Oh, I'm so glad. So very—you can't conceive how glad! What are you doing up here?"

I could barely make out her face and form in the darkness.

"I heard something and went out to the stairs. I thought it was—never mind. It seemed to be a female."

"Do you think it was the Hag?" I asked.

She seemed to welcome my frankness. "Do you? She disappeared on the stairs, whatever—whoever she was."

"I think it must have been," I said, considering her very brave. "I saw something enter my room." Suddenly suspicion born of everything that had happened since I met Mrs. Sedley reared its head once more. Were Elspeth Sedley's words the mere attempt to explain her own presence in these darkness-haunted corridors tonight?

"Yes? Tell me. What?" She echoed with what seemed to me an extraordinary amount of eager-

ness, considering the lateness of the hour and the mysterious occurrences in this region, of which we both were very much aware.

"The Hag was in my chamber," I said flatly. I thought that if, by some weird but wholly possible chance, Elspeth Sedley was masquerading as that terrible Hag in order to persuade me once and for all to forget my purchase of the Hag's Head, she might well appear now as herself, innocent and merely joining my search. She had not fooled me, if such was the case, however. I still did not trust her. Perhaps she was here to assure that I did not scream and stir up the household over the Hag. Or perhaps it had been her intention to spy upon me, watching my reaction to the night's evil business.

"Can we find a light somewhere?" she asked. "I cannot imagine why I did not take my bed candle."

I could well imagine. If she had not expected to find me wandering about, or if she hoped to keep the secret of her disguise, always assuming she was the Hag, I thought she would do precisely as she had done, and when she walked into me in the corridor, she would think up exactly this sort of excuse. I only wondered how she had produced that effect of skeletal fingers and what her real purpose was, unless it might have been to help Patrick in some way.

There was a murmur of voices at the end of the gallery where I assumed the staircase must be, and

a big flaring light cast its glow before it as Mrs. Hardwicke mounted the stairs to this floor, treading distinctly upon each stair. She made surprisingly more noise than had Elspeth, who seemed, from her lack of sound, to have floated upward.

"Who's there? What's amiss? Ah, it is you, ladies."

We replied tremulously, torn between the remnants of our fears and laughter at our own dishevelled appearance under Mrs. Hardwicke's strongly revealing lamplight, but she only looked at us with grim nods.

"Setting us all afright you were, with your whispers and your flitting by my door like as if you was bodiless."

"I did not pass your door tonight, Mrs. Hardwicke," said Elspeth. "No more did Miss Kathleen."

" 'Twas you or yet it be a phantasm," the housekeeper replied, and compressed her lips as she looked us over under the gleam of her lamp.

Instinctively, I looked behind me. For the first time since Sir Nicholas had escorted me to my room—how long ago and in what safer time that seemed!—I was able to get a clear view of the sweep and elegance of this gallery. Certainly, no setting could be further from anyone's vision of a weird old hag, stalking victims for reasons as yet unknown.

"I see nothing. Nayther footpad nor haunt. Begging your pardon, Miss Elspeth."

"Nonetheless, she was here," I said, recalling vividly that creature at the foot of my bed scarcely half an hour before.

"'*She*,' mum?" echoed Mrs. Hardwicke derisively, trying to catch Elspeth's eye as she sought to find reinforcement for her feeling.

"The Hag," I said, not being mealy-mouthed about it. But I was much more interested in examining the floor outside my room, and the two women followed me, exchanging glances at my growing signs of peculiarity. I had, however, seen smudged, muddy red marks on the carpet leading up to my door, which was ajar as I had left it. I looked down at Elspeth's feet, daintily shod in pink satin, and the housekeeper, whose large feet were bare and undeniably chilly.

Neither woman was likely to have been outside recently in the storm; yet there were the undeniable marks of a visitor from outside, and they led into my room.

I beckoned to Mrs. Hardwicke. "Give me the light, please."

She looked surprised and a little affronted but did as I asked, and with the big, steady glow of the lamp protected by reflectors from any vagrant breeze, I pushed open my door and looked in. As I had suspected, there were several faint signs upon the carpeting leading to the foot of my bed. I lit my bed candles from the housekeeper's light and returned it to her.

"Please go and arouse Sir Nicholas."

Mrs. Hardwicke looked around as though she expected to find someone else whom I had addressed. She waved the big lamp with such enthusiasm that I thought she might spill the oil upon the floor.

"But Miss, that'll be none so easy. You see, when I first was woke up by the sound of you ladies, I knocked on Sir Nicholas's door. He did not answer. I tried the door. . . ."

"And he was not within," Elspeth finished coldly. "Is this, perhaps, our answer, Kate?"

I snapped, "How ridiculous! In any case, I believe these marks are from that red soil in the bottomland of Seven Spinney. I saw just such soil there today. And I saw, too, something watching me. I believe now it was the Hag."

"Are you mad?" Elspeth's exclamation startled both Mrs. Hardwicke and me. She saw us staring at her and added less violently, "Do go and fetch Nicholas. He must be somewhere in this accursed house."

Much resenting this aspersion upon a house in which she obviously had a proprietary interest, Mrs. Hardwicke said, with reluctance, "Well, Miss, I'll be doing that. But I don't know as I quite see what it's about. A grain of dust in the carpeting mayhap. It's not as if the help one gets these days is of the best, and Sir Nicholas has never seen fit to find fault with me on that score."

"Do go!" Elspeth commanded in a shrill voice that was unusual for her. And as the housekeeper

left, the girl moved toward the window where the open portiers gave some view of the scene in the rainswept garden below. I could not understand the cause of her startling behavior, but when she asked me to look at the distant gates of the park, I obeyed her, still puzzled.

What I saw, or rather, did not see, out there puzzled me even more, for I had been fully aware of the broken wall where the lightning had struck within the hour, and now, with the storm abating and allowing the barest illumination from the still clouded heavens, I could make out the iron gates, battered but, for the most part, still standing. It was surely not this which Elspeth had expected me to observe. I pushed the window open and gazed out upon the park, which now had that soft patina of calm and safety so deceiving in countrysides given to moorland fogs. I thought, as I gazed down, that among the foliage in the center of the park there was a faint flurry that was unnatural in consideration of the windless calm that had succeeded the storm. While I wondered if our intruder could possibly be still there in the park, perhaps afraid to use the gates for fear of being seen by those of us who were up and about, Elspeth had retreated from the window.

When it seemed there would be no more stirrings among the foliage in the park, I looked back into the room, wondering that Elspeth, who had called my attention to the view from the window, should now be so very quiet behind me. Small wonder I

had not heard her. She had gone out into the corridor-gallery again. I saw her shadow upon the opposite wall of the corridor, a shadow formed as a result of the light from my bed candles. She must have been moving around almost in the dark behind me, silent as death.

At the instant I turned around, I too was moving quietly, and she was not aware that I had done so. As I watched her in the corridor, I noted how fixedly she regarded the carpeting. No doubt she was trying to guess the origin of those occasional red-mud spots. I could not understand her secretive manner, but then, there was much in Elspeth Sedley's conduct that required explaining. She bent over, ran her forefinger daintily along a small section of carpet, and then, ever so slightly, curved that forefinger so that her long, sharp nail scraped away at what she saw.

So that was her scheme, to destroy all signs of our fantastic and hideous night visitor! Ghosts did not leave tracks in mud, I told myself. She had merely confirmed my suspicions.

I raised my branch of candles, held them over the floor of my room, and realized that while I had been diverted like an ignorant, unsuspicious child, to stare out the window at the quiet, night-shrouded Everett Park below, she had seen fit to scrape away every shred of evidence that there had been a visit by a very human being disguised as the Hag—or so I began to reason. It was not what I would have expected of a girl who had previously held out

against visiting Everett Hall because of a supposed pursuit by just such a phantom hag. What event, what person or fear, had brought about this sudden collusion between Elspeth and our Hag?

Having discovered her little scheme, though too late to prevent its fulfillment, I was thus better prepared for what she doubtless conceived was her shattering surprise to me. Mrs. Hardwicke was moving about on the staircase. We could see the light of the lamp she carried as it cast elongated shadows of every object it fell upon, rapidly twisting them in tortuous hapes that changed with every motion of her hand. Apparently Mrs. Sedley too had been roused by all the wanderings about the Hall, not to mention our loudly whispered arguments with each other over the invader from the moors.

We heard Mrs. Hardwicke reply to some words of the crippled woman just as I said to Elspeth, "What do you mean by removing all the traces of that person who entered my room tonight?"

"I removed nothing. You are imagining things," she said as cool as you please; yet there was high color in her cheeks. I could not but feel that lying was not in her ordinary nature and that despite her daring, she felt a certain guilt.

"You forget," said I, "that someone else saw those prints besides ourselves."

Elspeth's glance darted one way and then the other as if she expected to see another presence

with us in all these shadows beyond the candlelight.

"What do you mean? There is no one—"

"Mrs. Hardwicke saw the marks," I said firmly.

Elspeth took a breath and then smiled.

"You are mistaken. I heard her say she did not know what it was we were refining so much about over a grain of dust upon the carpet."

It was perfectly true, and how well Elspeth had played upon that remark by Mrs. Hardwicke, who had the housekeeper's natural anxiety not to acknowledge anything that interfered with her own province of responsibility.

I started to say as much but stopped as we both heard the housekeeper reply stiffly to Mrs. Sedley, "That I can't be knowing, mum. Not seeing what's had the household in an uproar. Miss Kathleen's been and bid me fetch up His Ludship for to make search."

I heard Mrs. Sedley's sweet, plaintive voice reply, still sweet, but sharper. "My goodness! How very busy our young visitor is, to be sure! Giving orders to dear Nicky's servants quite as though she were already installed here. But, Mrs. Hardwicke, you will come down here to me as soon as you are given Miss Kate's kind permission, will you not?"

I caught the malice there and laid it to her fear for the outcome of the relationship between her granddaughter and Sir Nicholas. It occurred to me that having ruined two lives with her first med-

dling in the love affair between Sir Nicholas and Megan Sedley, she might more wisely leave Elspeth to work out her own life—not to mention the man whom she had once before rendered so bitterly unhappy.

However, their happiness or lack of it was no concern of mine. I was still furious with Elspeth for her part in trying to set down everything that had happened to me tonight as mere fustian or the imagination of a girl who did not know truth from fancy. But I knew truth well enough. I was thoroughly convinced that the Hag who had sat on my bed tonight and moved to tighten those terrible fingers upon my throat had been real, very likely someone I knew and had spoken with, disguised for what reason I could not yet surmise. Nor could I be sure what had been the reason for the attempt upon me. I had done very little in Yorkshire to arouse that kind of wild enmity.

I went out into the corridor, past Elspeth and to the head of the stairs. "Mrs. Hardwicke, have you notified Sir Nicholas that we would like to see him?"

"It's no easy thing, that, Miss. Nayther can I find Hardwicke himself. Nor yet have the maids been and seen nothing."

"Is Jacob back yet from Maidenmoor?"

"Not to my knowing, Miss, if you please."

Jacob had made the ride to Maidenmoor ostensibly to notify the Sedleys of my presence here, and since his news had merely succeeded in packing

Mrs. Sedley off to Everett Hall to flaunt all the virtues of her granddaughter and forestall any "wiles" of mine, I could see no reason why he should not have returned, even if he had walked the distance across the moor by way of the Hag's Head and Seven Spinney. He had been a friendly, common-sense person when I met him on the hearth, and I thought his presence at Everett Hall would help to uncover any chicanery.

"What is it, girls?" asked Mrs. Sedley, a trifle anxiously.

Elspeth spoke quickly behind me. So close and so silently she had moved that I started nervously, despite my intention to brave each of these suspicious people and get at the truth of tonight's happenings.

"No, Grandmama. There is nothing at odds up here. Kathleen had a nightmare. That is all."

"Aye, most likely," Mrs. Hardwicke put in unasked and, so far as I was concerned, decidedly unwanted.

"I don't know what the two of you may mean by that," said I as firmly as I had ever spoken in my life, only by extreme care excluding the growing panic from my voice. "But you are both lying, and I mean to find out why. Sir Nicholas will soon be well aware that you both have not told the truth about what is happening here, and I warn you, you cannot fool him, whatever game you may think you are playing with me."

"I suppose," said Elspeth with a faint curl of

those lips her grandmother had extolled for their sweetness, "you intend to prevail upon Nicholas by some such flirtation as has already gotten you so far into his good graces. But I doubt very much if even you can fool Nicholas forever."

"And how am I to be fooled?" asked Sir Nicholas's voice from the gallery on the lower floor as he came to the foot of the stairs and looked up at three flushed and quarrelsome females.

Mrs. Hardwicke coughed, curtseyed to him somewhat inadequately in her plaid nightgown, which covered her to the chin and to the toe.

"I believe the young ladies fancied seeing a . . . kind of phantasm and was after sending for Your Ludship for to catch the foul thing, such as it was."

"It was nothing at all, believe me, Nicholas," said Elspeth, moving out from behind me and descending the stairs with her usual grace. She seemed never at loss, in public, for that beauty of face and movement which her grandmother justly praised, though I felt my own teeth on edge at the thought of it. But surely Sir Nicholas was too intelligent to be swayed by her words, however much he might find her ravishingly lovely in her nightgown and robe and slippers, all of pink with satin bows.

He looked up at me when she had finished speaking, and I saw how dark and powerful his eyes were as they caught the light of Mrs. Hardwicke's lamp. I felt again in that instant the peculiar weakness I

had felt early in the evening before dinner, when he had been so kind and gentle, brushing my hair and showing me every attention.

"Yes, sir," I said, since he seemed to expect me to make some sort of reply or defense. "I did see something. A—person entered my room. I think it meant to do me some harm. But a noise in the corridor or else a clap of thunder from the storm frightened it off."

"But Nicholas," Elspeth interrupted, "no one else saw this thing. And when Miss Bodmun first complained of it, she seemed to think it might have been a mere fancy—a nightmare."

I leaned forward on the edge of the stairs and called to her furiously, forgetting I was not now on a beach at home quarreling with a fisherman's daughter, "You liar! How dare you say such a thing! It is the greatest untruth that ever was!"

To my astonishment and chagrin, Sir Nicholas was smiling when he took the stairs in three long steps and, getting between us, carefully and firmly seized my arm.

"Come, child. Up to bed. We've had enough excitement for one night. Undoubtedly you ate too much syllabub. It always makes for nightmares."

I shook all over with fury, to be so humiliated, and in front of those three detestable women, not ome of whom would dream of coming to my rescue. Surely, Mrs. Hardwicke might have said something about those red-mud spots on the carpet.

But if she had, then, I supposed, she would imagine herself the target for abuse because of her poor housekeeping.

As for Sir Nicholas, I looked up and saw his faint smile and very nearly wrenched myself free of his grasp. Was he actually so ignorant, after all that had happened about the dogs in the garden tonight, that he still believed I had merely been having nightmares? Too much syllabub, indeed! As a matter of plain fact, Mrs. Sedley's collapse had interfered seriously with my taking a second helping.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

I WENT, more or less under pressure, to my room, dragging or pulling all the way. When he thrust the door open with the toe of his boot, I realized it was no good my protesting further. He had everything under his own control and would pay no heed to me, being so very sure of himself in all matters.

He kicked the door shut behind us, which seemed greatly daring to me. What would the others think? And would Mrs. Sedley write the full and dreadful details on a page to Mama?

He swung me around by one hand, and I sat down abruptly on the foot of the bed, smoldering at the indignity of it all.

"I assure you, sir," said I in what I hoped was the oldest voice had I ever used, "every word of what I said was true. I did see someone in my—in this room. And it tried to kill me. It was someone pretending to be the Hag."

With that extreme patience used by normal adults to scarcely breeched infants, Sir Nicholas stood before me, removing the candles from my hand and nodding at my assurances.

"Yes; yes, certainly. But you must forget these

wild efforts of yours to promote a fear of the Hag's Head. My man is purchasing it from the Sedley agent tomorrow in Maidenmoor. Now, will you be the sweet, sensible puss I know you are? Lock yourself in here when I leave. Then go to sleep and do not leave this room until after your breakfast tea is served."

"Excellent, sir," I replied demurely, incensed at his announcement of his own plan to purchase Megan Kelleher's inn before I could do so. Apparently he would stoop to any stratagem to thwart me.

He set down the candles and took my two hands in his. Had I not been so very angry, I am persuaded I should quite have fallen in with his blandishments, for he had never seemed so handsome or so very imposing. But I knew his use of these qualities was for his own ends. He wished me to be out of his way, for what purpose I could not imagine, unless we knew all along that I was telling the truth and wished to silence me before I betrayed too much. I would not in the least put it beyond him.

"That's my good girl," he said in a voice whose warmth and merry tenderness made me shiver with that now familiar sensation of uneasy pleasure he aroused in me. How skillfully he used his insincere weapons against women like me! I supposed it might have been much the same with Megan Sedley before she married Patrick. Only she had guessed this man's use of his charm.

"Thank you," I said, adding just as he was sure he had me beaten, "Only I cannot lock myself in and do as you ask me—sir."

The beginnings of a frown cracked up that handsome, hitherto unfurrowed brow, and I beheld his forbidding scowl. "Really? May one ask why?"

"Certainly!" I ended triumphantly. "If you would examine that door, you will find it impossible to lock."

He gave a sigh of exasperation at my trick, then broke into a laugh. Greatly to my astonishment, he reached out beyond my hands and caught my shoulders, and before I could turn my head, he kissed me as close to my lips as makes no matter, and then smiled at my surprise. With his eyes glowing under the light of my candles, he looked at me for a moment before letting me go. I licked my lips deliberately to let him know he was not to win my obedience by such methods, but he only laughed, chucked me under the chin with his curved forefinger, and left me. He paused before entering the hall to consider my problem of the lockless door.

After looking around at the room's furnishings, he lifted a lyre-backed chair over to the door, propped it under the doorlatch, and showed it to me.

"When I have gone, place the back under the latch—so. It would be exceedingly difficult for anyone in the corridor to open the door. You see?"

I nodded, unable to speak; for I was rather shocked to find that I had thoroughly enjoyed his

kiss, and I did not wish him to guess his power over my emotions.

When he had gone, I got up and started across the floor to do as he suggested. As I did so, my stocking foot trod upon something stiff that stuck to the heel of my stocking.

I reached down, scraped it up between two fingers, and found that it was a clod of red mud. I moved more slowly across the floor, examining every part of the carpet, noting that the marks were found wherever Sir Nicholas's boots had stepped in my room. I opened the door wider and looked into the gallery-corridor. However I might have been deceived about Elspeth's removal of the mud spots from my room, I had seen her remove all signs from the corridor. And more—I had examined that corridor myself after catching her. There had been no spots of red mud. There were now, though, and further traces wherever Sir Nicholas had walked or paused a few minutes before.

I began to shiver, feeling the rush of chill air through all the galleries and corridors of the large house. I went back into my room quickly, thrust the chair under the latch as Sir Nicholas had indicated, and ran across the room to wrap my shivering arms in my coat while I calmed these dreadful, nagging fears and cleared my mind for immediate plans. I was still so nervous that I could scarcely remain calm long enough to ask myself why Sir Nicholas found it necessary to frighten me by wearing that preposterous Hag's garments. Or even

worse—had he intended to strangle me before being interrupted by the thunder? Perhaps, though, he could be kind at one moment and a raging lunatic the next. That would explain all very cozily—except, of course, his maddening fascination to me, which made my discovery of his crimes all the worse.

Small wonder he had dismissed Ezra Hardwicke's comment about the frantic dogs and scoffed at my story of the invader who might be a phantom. Phantom, indeed! How could I have been so gullible? Nothing on earth could really look like that Hag. It had all been a trick. It surprised me to discover that the most painful aspect of the masquerade was not the danger to my life, but the feeling that I had been betrayed by a man with whom I might have fallen in love. Only minutes before I had again been under the influence of the man's sensuous power. This was what came of not heeding Mama's strictures on the subject. How often she had reminded me, "Brief acquaintance does not bear well. One must know a person a length of time before making judgments."

The warm cavern formed by the coat around my body soon restored my spirits, and in no time I was making vigorous plans to outfox my dangerous adversary. Only to think that such tricks and masquerades, and even attempts on my life, must have been pursued in order to keep me from purchasing the Hag's Head Inn! What could possibly be worth so much in that abandoned building?

Every time I thought about that idiotic fright I had received at the inn, a fright that had killed poor Macrae, I became angry with Sir Nicholas all over again. How could he care so very much about a mere piece of real estate that he would help to spread such wild tales and even wear Guy Fawkes fright masks with which to accomplish his purposes?

My childish attack of nerves, for which I was heartily ashamed, had nearly subsided, when every nerve started up in alarm as I heard the latch of my door tried softly. The chair I had thrust under the latch began to move and shake under the pressure. I glanced around the room in renewed panic, wondering what force the simple, delicate chair would withstand.

"Kathleen?" Elspeth called in an urgent whisper. "Let me in."

I hurried to the door, demanding from my temporary refuge behind the chair, "Why? Can't it wait until morning?"

"Kathleen! Please—he may hear us."

So she knew, as I did, that Sir Nicholas was our adversary. I removed the chair very slightly and opened the door scarcely more than the width of my hand. I could see one of Elspeth's heavy lidded eyes staring at me through the barely open door, her true feelings masked as always by her lashes, long and dark and spidery.

"What do you want?" I asked suspiciously.

"Hush! He seems to be everywhere tonight. Let me in. Do."

I could not but be doubtful of this request in the deep night. Indeed, the strange dead gray mist that was the harbinger of dawn had already begun to creep into my room beneath the portieres at the windows.

"Can't it be later?" I asked, only to have her put her long finger to her lips, moving with a kind of deliberation that made her appear almost drugged.

"Please. We cannot talk like this. He is sure to hear us. It is about Grandmama." She rattled the latch again, and I felt that if she persisted in her odd behavior she surely would arouse Sir Nicholas, plus his dogs and any number of other unpleasant things. Whatever happened, I did not want to encounter his Hag's disguise any more tonight.

Before letting her in, I did what must have been conceived a very odd thing by anyone, had my action been subject to witness. I looked about for a weapon against this young vampire. I still smarted under Mrs. Sedley's insinuation that I was inferior, less feminine, but I meant to protect myself against the eerie hint of danger she and her granddaughter presented.

"Quickly!" Elspeth commanded in a hoarse whisper, rattling the latch angrily.

"Yes. Yes. One moment. The chair is caught." I ran my fingers over the escritoire to the right of the door and found amid the dust a pen with its

shaven point split and broken. It was inadequate, but its ragged, broken point would certainly give pause to an attacker. I broke off the feather and put the rest of the pen inside the belt of my gown. Then I wrested the chair out from under the lock, and through the narrow space I yielded to her, she squeezed her way with a serpent's ease, then closed the door silently behind her. I saw that her hands were shaking.

She turned to me with dark, accusing eyes. "What have you done with her?" she asked. "Tell me where she went to."

Scarcely anything she said would have surprised me more.

"Done with . . . ? Sir Nicholas brought me here and went away. I haven't seen anyone else."

"You must have. Grandmama is gone. I couldn't think of anywhere else she might have gone of her own wish." She was looking around the little room all the time she spoke, her dark gaze taking in every shadowy corner where the candles did not penetrate. It made me excessively nervous.

"In any case, I have not seen her," I said, though I suspect it fell on deaf ears. "When I met you in the gallery earlier in the night, I heard your grandmother speaking to Mrs. Hardwicke. But I have not seen her since her illness at dinner."

I noted that Elspeth had dressed after we met earlier. It made me feel the importance of this odd business about Mrs. Sedley. Elspeth moved around the room shaking the portieres, so that I saw dawn

was at hand, and rustling the frilled bed curtains, which remained open as they had been when I entered the room, so that they now gave off little sprays of dust.

I watched her, finding her panic contagious.

"She is not here. I give you my word. Can she walk without help?"

A faint breeze came from between the windows, which I had incompletely closed, and it ruffled Elspeth's muslin gown as she fluttered about, groping at the furniture, thrusting it out of the way. When she swung around toward me, her fingers like claws, her face whiter than I had ever seen it, she whispered in a way that made my skin prickle, "Where can she have got to? Nothing would make her walk further than a few steps. My own room was beside hers, and I heard nothing. I have gone through room after room. She is nowhere. Yet she never walks, except upon the most pressing occasions."

I unlatched the door and peered out into the gallery. It was as silent and at first as dark as it had been at midnight. I found it almost incredible that at this hour Mrs. Sedley should have chosen to walk beyond an adjoining room or two. At the same time, any alternate possibility was even more incredible.

"But Elspeth, nothing else is possible. She cannot have been seized by—by anyone, without a disturbance. And for what cause?"

Elspeth made me frantically nervous, floating

toward me with the breeze fluttering her garments and her heavy-lidded eyes gazing at me with the curious inhuman gleam of a serpent.

"It is the Hag's Head he wants. Don't you understand? Grandmama won't sell it to him because he intends to burn it and everything in it."

"Burn it? But why?" Even now, after all I had learned of his evil, I could not quite countenance these new attacks upon Sir Nicholas. Despite myself, I would persist in thinking of those kind actions of his, the tenderness and . . . I could not forget the moment when he had kissed me. I could never forget that, I told myself, no matter what manner of creature he might be at other times.

"Some absurd notion that it would have pleased Aunt Megan. He doesn't wish Patrick or Grandmama to have people wandering about the inn searching for Aunt Megan's money."

"But if Sir Nicholas offered Mrs. Sedley the price of the inn, why should she prefer the Bodmun money? What can I give her that he cannot?"

"Oh, Kathleen, don't be tiresome! She intends that you shall give her all rights to the money if it is found. But Sir Nicholas told her flat out after dinner this evening that he would raze the inn to the ground. He considers it unhealthy to the moors, if you can imagine that!"

I could not but agree with Sir Nicholas privately, at least until someone troubled to refurbish the inn and give it new life and pleasanter legends than those which had succeeded Megan Sedley's mur-

der. It *was* unhealthy, and Sir Nicholas had made it so with his Hag and his haunts.

"But would he go so far as to make Mrs. Sedley vanish from his own home; merely to persuade her to sell to him rather than to me?" I asked Elspeth, thinking this latest episode even more insane than her other ideas.

She had moved, perhaps accidentally, between me and the door.

"And if we do not find Grandmama, it will be because he has murdered her!"

"Really, Elspeth! You are being absurd. Go to bed. Your grandmother will return—perhaps she's returned already—and you will feel like a little silly!" I reached around her and opened the door. She was so very disturbed that I did not think she had all her faculties.

"Then come with me. Prove me wrong." She was beginning to nudge me toward the gallery, and I felt as though I were being propelled by some force more mental than physical that I could not withstand. I realized that this was partly because of my own uneasy suspicions and partly because my companion aroused in me very nearly as keen a suspicion as did Sir Nicholas himself!

I stopped only long enough to squeeze my foot into my wrinkled but dry left shoe. Elspeth waited in the doorway, and out of the corner of my eye I saw her carefully scuffing her dainty shoe over one of those fresh red-mud spots left by Sir Nicholas's boots. I was wryly amused at her effort. Ob-

viously, she thought it was a mark she had missed earlier. My first reaction was to reflect upon the oddity of her attempting to conceal evidence of Sir Nicholas's wickedness when she pretended to dislike him so much. Unless, of course, she thought she was covering traces of someone else's wickedness!

But as we left the room together and hurried on tiptoe along the gallery, it rather belatedly occurred to me that in all likelihood she really did believe these were someone else's marks. In that case, she was trying to protect the wrong person. The gallery corridor was still frightfully dark, but the first daylight from some unshuttered window glistened on the frames of various Everett ancestral portraits, and we found our way to the big, sweeping staircase by these reflected gleams of light.

We had barely reached the gallery rail at the top of the stairs, when Elspeth uttered a sharp whispered curse that would have surprised her grandmother and drew back against me. Without questioning her movement, I ran silently back into the gallery and pressed hard into the darkest corner I could find. Elspeth followed me. During those first seconds of our panic, I thought she must have seen the Hag at the very least, for I heard that uneven tap-tap sound near the foot of the stairs. Then I remembered there could be no real Hag. There was only Sir Nicholas and his loathsome disguise. The sound we heard on the lower floor gallery was the dragging step of Ezra Hardwicke.

To my relief he went on along the gallery, and gradually a door closed and his footsteps ceased.

"Perhaps we should have asked him if he has seen your grandmother," I whispered, but she scorned this impatiently.

"If he has taken her in charge, he isn't going to tell us, is he? And if we speak to them, they will both be on guard against us. Nicholas probably has the Hardwickes primed for this thing."

Elspeth hurried lightly to the stairs and down. I followed close upon her heels, until we reached an open door along the gallery, and I saw the bright streak of light from what appeared to be several candelabra. Elspeth pointed to it and whispered, "Grandmama likes a great deal of light. It was that open door which troubled me. From my room I saw the bar of light upon the floor of the corridor. So I got up and went to see. I thought perhaps someone had paid her a visit and left the door partially open." She paused and looked back at me. "That was more than half an hour ago. I dressed while I waited. . . ." Her whispered voice lost its caution. As we approached her grandmother's door she seemed to grow more and more apprehensive, and to be truthful, I did myself.

I looked down the long gallery with all its Everett faces staring at us as far as we could see, and I noticed the peculiar effect of the early morning breeze, which turned this corridor into a whispering gallery, not a very comfortable background for my own growing fears. It was as if a breath of

the evil in the Hag's Head had blown across the moor to taint this house.

Elspeth pushed open the door of Mrs. Sedley's room and murmured huskily, "Kate, oh Kate, where can she be?"

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

I NEEDED NO distressed exclamations from Elspeth to warn me that Mrs. Sedley had not yet returned to her room, but I felt we could do considerably more than merely wring our hands and wail.

"Find out which of her garments are missing. In that way we can know whether she left of her own accord."

"Yes . . . of course. I should have thought." She opened the big, old-fashioned wardrobe at one side of the room as I looked around and under Mrs. Sedley's bed. Her bed slippers were still here, but there were no shoes.

"Who undressed your grandmother last night?" I asked, puzzled about the missing shoes. In her own household, of course, her shoes would be placed with the rest of her footgear in cupboard or wardrobe, but here, since she was upon a mere one-night visit, her shoes might have been left at the side of her bed. The only alternative was the wardrobe.

"Mrs. Hardwicke helped me. One of the maids was about to do so, but that dreadful housekeeper volunteered. Grandmama was not well, you know.

She'd asked Nicholas straight out to spare the inn if he bought it, and as you know, he refused. He must always have hated Grandmama, ever since she interfered in his romance with Aunt Megan, but you know Grandmama. Once he came into the title, butter wouldn't melt in her mouth. It is the same thing with Patrick and me."

"Patrick and you!" I echoed, wondering if she meant what she seemed to mean, that there was something more between them, an understanding that would be as shocking to Mrs. Sedley as—I confess—it was to me. For no matter how charming or likable Patrick Kelleher might be, the fact was that he had married Elspeth's Aunt Megan, and worse, was her widower, with a taint, obscure but present, of the wife-murderer.

"Yes. You know she detests poor Uncle Patrick. But mark me, he was welcome enough as a husband for Aunt Megan, when Grandmama thought he was a great Irish peer. And if he were to find Aunt Megan's money now, he would be charming and elgible once more."

But I disagreed. "Not if your grandmother knows it is her own money that makes him charming and eligible."

She started to say something furious but broke off, as though suddenly aware of the far more important matter that faced us.

"Her day gown is here, and her cloak and petticoats. Yes, and her stockings."

"What about her shoes?" I asked.

"No. It seems to me that I saw old Hardwicke drop them by the bed."

"But they aren't here, Elspeth. See for yourself. What about her bed wrapper?"

"Gone," said Elspeth, upon examination. "That should mean something."

I clung to any slight favorable sign. "But don't you see? It means she left the room on her own initiative, else they would not have reason to think of her slippers. And she was walking, else she would not have worn her shoes."

Elspeth's depressed spirits suddenly lifted.

"She is wandering about in this house, somewhere. But where? And for what reason?"

I glanced out into the gallery, and she joined me as I considered this ordinary—yet so extraordinary—thing which had happened. Had it been anyone but Mrs. Sedley, there could have been a dozen reasons for leaving this room dressed only in night clothing and walking shoes. The corridors would be cold to the feet of a woman in bed slippers. But for Mrs. Sedley, in her painful, rheumatic condition, it was foolhardy. There was no sense in it. I looked back at her bed. Even the bell cord to summon the servants or other help was near at hand.

Whatever Elspeth's objections, I knew there was nothing for it now but to search the entire Everett Hall, room by room, bedchamber by bedchamber. I said so to Elspeth. She reacted with violence that confused and worried me, for until this mo-

ment she had given every indication of being more alarmed than I about this very odd disappearance. Why then did she fear to search the Hall? What was she afraid of finding?

Elspeth caught my arm as I started into the gallery.

"But if the Hardwickes have persuaded her . . . of if Nicholas . . . I mean to say, can there be some reason we don't suspect?"

"Don't be ridiculous. Come along." Either she wished to find her grandmother or she did not. Her attitude was ambiguous, but I had made up my mind she was going to carry through despite one or the other of her fears.

She followed along behind me, down the gallery in the most hesitant way, as though I had suggested something hitherto undreamed of. As for me, I felt that I had been challenged by this silly little mystery. I knew perfectly well we were going to find Mrs. Sedley on some normal errand, discussing a household matter with the Hardwickes or even arguing the sale of the Hag's Head with our host.

Elspeth tapped upon my shoulder. "Perhaps it would be best if we listen at each door, to be quite sure, before we knock."

I was out of all patience with her. "Really, Elspeth, talk of our interrupting, which seems to concern you so closely! How would it appear to Sir Nicholas or even Mrs. Hardwicke, if they caught us all bent over listening at keyholes and other-

wise appearing to be mindless gudgeons?" I hope she understood that we must not place ourselves at the mercy of the slightly sinister people in this house. Whatever we did, we must be able to defend our own actions legally. We were dealing, when all was said, with the magistrate of this parish, and it would go hard and shamefully with us if we had no legal recourse with all our prowling about a house that was not ours.

I felt a tiny, fluttering panic in my stomach that threatened to grow as I walked silently but purposefully along the whispering gallery, past the many portraits that watch us out of dead Everett eyes, but I was determined that my companion should not guess my own state of nerves.

At the first door beyond Elspeth's own, I paused and rapped lightly. All was silent within. I tried the latch. It opened under my touch, and I heard Elspeth catch her breath and put out her hand, either to help or to stop me—I could not be sure which. She need not have concerned herself either way. The door opened so easily that I knew that nothing sinister would be found within. The stuffy little room was dark, however, and the light from the gallery was only filtered in from some distant uncovered window at the end of the corridor. I made my way across the room, avoiding the furniture by instinct, and put aside the portieres just enough to gaze around. The room had been a study but was clearly not in use at present. There was just enough dust upon the dark and gloomy

furniture, the writing table, and the crowded bookshelves to suggest that Mrs. Hardwicke saw to its occasional cleaning but that the master of Everett Hall seldom ventured within. There were no cupboards, wardrobes, water closets, or other places by which the strange disappearance of Mrs. Sedley might be accounted for.

Elspeth had remained at the door but boldly walked in and looked around, once it seemed sure I would find no signs of human habitation.

I was considerably ahead of her when I tried the next room along the gallery. It proved to be a utility closet of sorts, and I had looked into the further room before she joined me. This was a large, comfortable study, very male, with much-used leather furnishings and a lamp burning low upon a large and handsome escritoire. I was sure it must belong to Sir Nicholas, who had to all indications very recently left it. Various legal documents lay around, some opened, with penned remarks on the margins, and I guessed from these that Sir Nicholas took the legal responsibilities of his position very seriously. What a great pity, I thought, that he should have stooped to his shameful and perhaps criminal tricks in order to obtain that inn, when he showed every other sign of being a man of talent and attainment!

"What if he should find us here?" Elspeth whispered, looking over her shoulder worriedly.

"In that event," I said, glancing around to see if

there were any red-mud footprints, "we will ask him kindly, at his leisure, to produce your grandmama for us."

"Kate, you would never!"

I felt this naïve incredulity deserved no response, and anyway, I had discovered one of those telltale marks of red mud upon the carpet. So Sir Nicholas had been in here, as I suspected, and had left as a double proof to me the marks of the Hag who had made as if to strangle me earlier in the evening. No matter how many proofs I might find, each of them was a keener disappointment. I glanced out the big windows upon the calm park, still shrouded in gray dawn with just a hint of the sunrise that must be illuminating the eastern sky at this moment. It was this pink reflection of dark, I thought, which I saw now across the moors to the south and west, amid that gray pile called the Hag's Head. It was not a ghostly candle at all. I stared at it for several seconds, until recalled to what Elspeth conceived to be our great danger. And of course she could well have been right.

"What are you looking at on the moor? There is nothing one can see at this hour. Do come out of here before he catches us."

I moved rapidly through the room toward her, skirting the big, masculine, rather cluttered furnishings, careful not to glance at the mark on the carpet for fear she would try to destroy it as she had those on the carpets upstairs. I was still quite

sure she thought she was destroying evidence against someone else. I was puzzled as to what person she might imagine she was protecting.

We had searched the final rooms on the west face of Everett Hall to the north corner ballroom without finding anything living. The ballroom appeared to be long unused and completely disguised by covers that shrouded everything, even the large crystal lusters.

Elspeth looked around, her lips curving with contempt. She murmured, still in her husky whisper, "Once on a time, before ever Patrick came back and told me the straight of things about Nicholas and Aunt Megan, I used to fancy I should like to be Lady Everett. It was the hope of turning out this room, removing the Holland covers, polishing those lusters, seeing the room shimmer with the light of hundreds of candles . . ."

I looked at her curiously. It was evident no thought of Sir Nicholas's many attractions had ever entered her head. What sorrows he must have endured over the murder of Megan Kelleher, to have left this room untended and unused for so many years! But if he himself had murdered his love because she would not leave her gay and faithless husband, then this might explain Elspeth's feelings. It was dreadful. I refused to believe it of him. The masquerade as the Hag, perhaps; the attempted attack on me; but how to explain his gentle moments in my presence? There was no reasoning it out. I only knew, as I looked around

that room, moving aside the covers in a hopeless search for signs of Mrs. Sedley, that it would not have needed the glories of this room to make Sir Nicholas seen desirable to me.

Elspeth had gone over to the north windows and turned back to face me quickly, her cheeks flushed, her breath short and nervous.

"What is out there?" I asked, starting toward her.

"Nothing. Only the stable. No one there, thank God!"

Not trusting her, I looked out over her shoulder but saw only the eastern skyline over the high peaks on the moor, and, much nearer, the stables, with one young stallion partially visible, kicking up a small fuss. I started to make some remark about the stallion, an aimless question, but I forgot it immediately when she whispered, "Sh! and gestured toward the door into the gallery.

We had left it ajar, and yet I heard nothing. We stood there staring apprehensively at each other. A floor creaked, and I whispered, "The stairs, I think," but she shook her head.

"Probably one of the Hardwickes at the other end of the gallery."

We waited until no more sounds were heard, and then, after glancing in at doors across the gallery, I heard a sleepy girl's voice respond, "Aye, mum. Is it me and Rose yer wantin', Miz Hardwicke?"

Deeply offended at the thought of my being mis-

taken for Mrs. Hardwicke, even in the semidarkness, I gave a muffled "No" and retired quickly into the corridor, pausing only long enough to get my bearings before hurrying up the main staircase. My brief glance out of doors had only made the interior of the Hall look darker, more impenetrable afterward.

As for Elspeth, I had lost all patience with her obstructive behavior. I knew she was following me, daintily and fearfully, somewhere in the dark lower regions of the staircase, but I no longer waited for her. After all my efforts to soothe Elspeth's fears, I was becoming convinced that Mrs. Sedley's disappearance was entirely her own idea. Whether she was abetted in this odd scheme by her granddaughter, I could not be sure, but I was beginning to suspect that if her scheme was not known to Elspeth, then the girl had two worries, and my search was beginning to cause her more concern than the queer way in which Mrs. Sedley had vanished.

I looked into my own bedchamber and out again, but the room beyond was locked, and after trying the latch vainly several times, I hurried on to the adjoining room, which proved to be nothing more than a bookroom so narrow and windowless that I could scarcely turn around in it without knocking down a dozen monstrously ancient and dusty books.

"Nothing in here," I whispered loudly, hearing what I took to be Elspeth's footsteps in the gallery

approaching the door. She did not reply, and I groped my way to the end of the little closet, raising my voice until it was perfectly audible to her. "Open the door wider, please. There doesn't seem to be a window."

But the small amount of light drifting in from the gallery began to fade. I looked around, realized what was happening, and rushed toward the door —too late! It had closed as gently and silently as if controlled by invisible threads. I was not worried immediately. It was one of those odd and ridiculous accidents which I might have expected, and without undo excitement, but the nasty little business of feeling my way through that book-lined passage and then finding the door would not open, gave me such a chilling fear as only the masquerading Hag had produced. Trying the latch again and calling in a fierce whisper to Elspeth did not prevent me from remembering the Hag, and wondering if I was indeed alone in the intense darkness of this long, narrow, coffinlike closet.

"Open the door! Elspeth, where are you?"

This produced no result whatever except to make me momentarily warm and breathless in these narrow confines. But I did not remain warm long. The moment my furious activity ceased, I began to be aware of the most insidious and seeping cold. It was frightfully annoying at first, and if it had not been an accident, I could only think very poorly of Elspeth's humor. It seemed odd to me later that I did not raise my voice to a scream for

several minutes. But a scream has always appeared to me a very poor resource, and only to be used when all other means of self-rescue have failed.

When the door did not yield to any of my pressure, I snatched up the first couple of books my groping fingers could reach and hurled them against the door, raising in the darkness a huge cloud of choking dust that seemed even more sickening because I could not see it. I coughed so much for the next few minutes that I was astonished when these sounds produced no result out in what appeared to be a peculiarly deserted corridor. I guessed by this time that these ancient walls were too thick to carry the sound of my voice beyond the dreadful little closet, for if Elspeth had deliberately shut me in here, she was not likely to open the door upon hearing my furious demands, which were beginning to carry a hint of panic, even to my own ears.

I listened very carefully after my latest outcry. Since I could hear nothing in the gallery, not creaking floorboards or any other sign of habitation, I assumed I could not be heard either, and the only person likely to know I was in here at all was the person who had closed that door. Always assuming it had not closed accidentally under the impetus of the sudden draft of a morning breeze.

It was time to rely upon my common sense, if any, and to do a little exploring. I gave the recalcitrant door one last angry kick, then turned my back to it and considered the Stygian darkness.

No matter how often I blinked and reopened my eyes, I still beheld nothing. I moved cautiously away from the door, feeling my way along the bookshelves with one hand, while the other, for the most part, found only a blank, unadorned wall, cold to the touch.

Suddenly, I rapped my exploring knuckles upon a metal object that proved to be a doorlatch halfway down the wall. I remembered the locked chamber next to this coffin-shape bookroom. Doubtless, this little airless cubicle had once been a powder closet for the adjoining chamber. I tried the latch several times and heard the rewarding sound of a large key rattling on the other side of the door. It would not take much effort to drop that key out, and if only one of the bodkins out of my hair was slender enough, it might serve in place of the key. Once I got into that room, at the very least, I could open the shutters and call for help from one of the servants, or anyone else who ventured into the park below.

It was simple enough. I felt rather proud of myself when, after poking about in the lock with a hair bodkin, I dislodged the key on the other side, though I could not hear it drop, and a few minutes later, I had the enormous satisfaction of feeling the latch turn under my hand.

I distinctly recollect taking two steps into the locked chamber before a cloud of soft, suffocating darkness fell upon me. As I raised my hands, scratching frantically at this new threat, the cloud

caught under my arms, and I had much ado to keep from strangling. I began to choke, still confused in my half-conscious state and believing that by some inexplicable means a bed tester and curtains had fallen upon me. I still believed it when my head was bursting with my effort to breathe and I felt consciousness floating away from me like a dimming red ball of fire.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

SOME MINUTES afterward, I knew better than to believe all this an accident, for I awoke to find myself entangled in a thick coverlet still permeated with dust. How could Elspeth be guilty of such treacherous behavior—first to lock me into that bookroom, then to lie in wait in this chamber, only to attempt my death? I was so furious over this treachery that I scarcely felt any bad effects from my recent near-strangulation, although I heard myself cough with annoying regularity while I got to my feet and examined the room. As I had thought, it was an out-of-fashion bedchamber, decently furnished but not dusted in some time. There was a broken place in one of the shutters, and the morning light prevented me from resting my hand upon a heap of melted tallow on the table at the foot of the four-poster bed. But as I slipped my hand away quickly, I recalled the liquid warmth in the center of the tallow and passed my palm above it again. My attacker had calmly waited in this room, with a candle for light, until I forced my way in, thinking myself so very clever.

I went to the windows, wincing at the pain caused by any movement of my head, and forced

open one of the shutters. Now I could see that though the room was not usually inhabited, someone had been waiting in here very recently. I examined the marks in the dust of the uncarpeted floor and found them exceedingly curious. Not one of the women in this house, including the servants, wore gowns whose hems swept the floor. Even Mrs. Sedley was very modern in her style of dress, and though I had never seen her walk, I had noted that her gowns were never below ankle length. Still, I thought, those sweeping marks of the dust could very well have been made by Mrs. Sedley's bed-wrapper. Or they might be the signs of . . .

I did not want to think of the Hag. Even now, when I knew that the Hag must be a mere masquerade of Sir Nicholas, I shivered at the thought of having been trapped in that little room all the while the incredibly ancient creature waited, patient as a spider, for me to break into her web. I wondered nervously where the creature had got to, now, at this moment.

I had now reached the door, which was locked as I had expected, but this time when I rattled the latch and banged my fists upon the panels, I felt the latch move against my fingers, and a key turned in the lock. As the door swung open, I saw Mrs. Hardwicke standing in the gallery, looking a trifle grim, though she was polite enough.

"Well now, ma'am, it is a surprising thing, altogether. How came you to be locked inside an unused chamber?"

Elspeth came running along the gallery. I had never seen her more nervous.

"Is it Grandmama?"

"No," I said. "It is only Kate. And where might you have got to?"

I was satisfied, from Mrs. Hardwicke's expression, that she shared my suspicion. For before Elspeth could answer she cut in rather sharply, "Aye, there'll be a matter for wonder. What with Mr. Patrick showing his face at the front door like as if he'd be that welcome."

Elspeth rushed to me, breathless and more concerned than I would ever have suspected. It could not be my sudden appearance that so excited her.

"Kathleen! You vanished so very oddly. Where did you get to? I looked everywhere. And then I saw Patrick out on the Heatherton High Road and called to him. I was desperate, Kate, believe me. Desperate! Even Mrs. Hardwicke thought me quite out of my senses. First Grandmama to vanish, and then you!"

"Where is Patrick now?" I demanded suspiciously, aware that the recent unpleasantness had given me the headache again.

"He is searching for Grandmama, with Hardwicke, through the *mistal* and the *laithe*."

I took this to refer in Yorkish fashion to the outbuildings, but I could not imagine why the men thought Mrs. Sedley would be found there.

Mrs. Hardwicke took me by the arm. "Be you

feeling right, Miss? You're looking a wee mite pale."

"I'm quite all right," I said with an irritation I could not explain. "You've not yet found Mrs. Sedley, I take it. Mrs. Hardwicke, how do you account for her odd disappearance ? She seems to have walked off in her bedwrapper and a pair of shoes. It is quite possible I met her in that locked bedchamber."

That upset both women.

"Miss! Whatever will ye mean by that?"

"Kathleen! How could you play tricks upon us so? If Grandmama is in there . . . Well, let's look!"

I said no more but let them rush away into that horrid chamber. As for me, I went abruptly to the wide staircase and sat down. It was a dizzying flight. I had never noticed this quality about the stairs before. I had the most curious sensation that when I went out the great front door of Everett Hall, I would see that the entire peark fell under the shadow of the distant Hag's Head Inn.

It did not, though. I stepped out into the park and, shading my eyes from the bright morning light, gazed off across the rolling moorland, which looked all mauve and dun color in the reflected sunlight. There was the dark, sunken spot like a slit in the landscape that I recognized as Seven Spinney, whose peculiar red mud had first given me the clue to the Hag's identity. And beyond, well beyond and to the west, its ancient dirty windows

catching the orange sun, was the huddled mass of the Hag's Head Inn.

It was curious, but a while ago, before my experience in those locked chambers abovestairs, I had looked out across the moors and seen a light in the Hag's Head that had appeared to be quite different from this reflection of the sunrise. It had been a flickering, faint little gleam, no bigger than a single candle. Such a light would be completely blotted out now, by the greater glow of those reflections. What person would be so brave or so foolish as to court the ghosts in that unhappy place, when it was still dark? I could scarcely believe that Megan Kelleher's small savings was the cause of such havoc, and of so many unusual and even criminal acts.

I pulled myself together, assuring myself that my recent imprisonment had made me merely angry, not frightened, and that in any case, I knew now that Sir Nicholas was responsible for my fear. Having satisfied myself, as I thought, upon that score, I was about to return to the house and renew the search with Mrs. Hardwicke on the upper floors, when the housekeeper came rustling along behind me in the doorway, muttering, "He must be got away before the master returns. There is sure to be trouble, and for His Ludship more than the Kelleher."

I believed her.

"Do you see him? Sir Nicholas, I mean. I know how he feels about the Irishman."

"Aye! We seen him from the attic window, off yon, hard by the trail across the moor from Heatherton. Let me by, Miss. He is sure to pass the stables, and I've no mind to have Hardwicke caught betwixt the two of them."

"Where is Elspeth?" I asked, following after her in great haste.

"We was making search of the upper floors, with Ezra taking view of the cellars, and found not a thread out of place. Not a hair of her that's missing. But young Miss has gone back to the lady's bedchamber looking after more signs."

Or to plant another ambush, I thought resentfully. I had not yet forgiven Elspeth Sedley for taking so long to find me behind those locked doors. There was in my mind the suspicion that without Mrs. Hardwicke, I might not have been let out properly, by the door, at all.

Still, none of this brought us any closer to finding the vanished old lady. If only one could trust Sir Nicholas, he was the man to accomplish wonders. If he were innocent, how comforting to go to him and assign him the task! I felt reasonably sure he would have Mrs. Sedley back in a trice—except that it was very likely he who had spirited her away.

"Where be you, man?" cried Mrs. Hardwicke to her husband, who came limping out of the stable to find out what had so overset his calm and capable wife.

"Master Kelleher is thinking he's found traces

of the old lady. He's got it in mind that His Lordship carried her off someplace."

"Get you gone, the both of you," commanded Mrs. Hardwicke, dashing much more rapidly at the stables than I had ever thought possible to her stiff-packed bulk.

Patrick came out, rubbing bits of red mud between his fingers and dangling something else that, upon sight of me, he stuffed into his jacket pocket. The sun lighted upon his still-tawny hair, giving him a kind of halo effect he ruined by his mischievous wink at me.

"Pretty Kate, we're about to play the fox-catcher with your guytrash friend."

"What do you mean?" I had the most idiotic hope that he did not mean what he plainly indicated, that his evidence was the kind admissible in court against Sir Nicholas. If only some miracle would make all right again, and His Lordship back in his safe seat as magistrate of the parish!

"Never you mind! But he'll swing for it, I'm thinking, if he's done the old dragon to death!"

Elspeth Sedley, looking down at us from an upstairs window, screamed at this, and cried out, "Patrick, what is it? Have you found her?" But he merely waved at Elspeth, holding up his fingers pressed together over the fast-crumbling mud.

While the Hardwickes were consulting together and she was explaining the approach of their employer, I reminded Patrick as calmly as possible, the better to impress him with the seriousness of his

accusation, "It is you whom Mrs. Sedley hates, sir. What if someone might suspect you have made away with her?" While this gave them all pause, I went rushing on, hoping I could, at least, water down whatever evidence he had against Sir Nicholas so that the two men would have an equal chance before the law. "You know well enough that Mrs. Sedley often has been at the expense of hiring searchers of the Hag's Head, hoping they would find your wife's little savings before you could lay hands upon it. I should think, Master Kelleher, that you would go slowly before you bring about any accusations that may recoil upon you."

"Thank you, Kathleen," said Sir Nicholas, as he came striding across the gravel path from the side gate of the park. "However, now that I am here to protect my own interests, the matter may be discharged in short order. Hardwicke, go to the east gate, open it, and usher Mr. Kelleher out upon the High Road. And lock the gate behind him."

It was an extremely uncomfortable minute for Mrs. Hardwicke and me and, I imagined, for Elspeth. She left the window hastily, and I supposed she must be running down the stairs to fend off any threatened violence against her uncle. As for me, despite all I knew or suspected, I was overjoyed by one small item of immense importance to me. If Sir Nicholas was only now appearing on his own grounds, and if Elspeth and Mrs. Hardwicke had seen him out on the moor, returning

from Heatherton, then it could not have been he a few minutes ago who lay in wait for me in that locked chamber. I had far, far rather it should be Elspeth, or one of the Hardwickes.

Hardwicke limped over toward the East Gate beyond the stables, only to have Patrick call after him in the friendliest way, "Stay a bit, Ezra. I am not so sure the Most Worshipful Justice of the Peace would wish you to dismiss me so summarily. I am persuaded he is far too well mannered for that."

"Do not count upon my manners," said Sir Nicholas with a grim smile and a light in his dark eyes that did not promise well for the intrusive Patrick. "If you are still here in ten minutes, I shall have the dogs set upon you."

I looked at him in astonishment, never having heard such a savage promise before except in idle threat, but I felt nervously that he meant every word. Patrick Kelleher, however, took something out of his jacket pocket, a piece of dark goods that I could not identify, and waved it tantalizingly in front of us. I heard Mrs. Hardwicke's gasp, close at my side, but did not know why. I guessed only that it was something that would do Sir Nicholas no good.

"Now then, Your Worship," Patrick continued in that insolent, laughing way of his which might seem charming at other times, but was grossly out of place here, "you're a man of power. All the

heath knows that. Quite capable of killing when it suits your purpose, and covering your crimes admirably behind your judicial robes—"

"Eight minutes," said Sir Nicholas, without raising his voice.

"And because you are a man who finds force ever the shortest distance to your object, I am amazed, Your Worship, that you should rely upon poor old Hardwicke here, or your underfed hounds, to do your foul work with me," Patrick finished, smiling boyishly and holding out the object in his hand in a way meant, I daresay, to be tantalizing. I pretended not to notice it, for I resented his trickery about revealing and concealing whatever his evidence might be. I knew he was hoping to taunt Sir Nicholas into an act which could show him in an extremely bad light later, in the courts, but he failed at this moment.

Sir Nicholas merely raised his eyebrows and explained, "I pay my servants, and I feed my animals so that they may handle carrion. . . . Ezra, this carrion has six more minutes. I will not ask you how it came to be admitted to these grounds, but it will not happen again. You understand me?" And he strode toward the house.

Patrick Kelleher had turned scarlet under this devastating insult, and he sprang forward, thrusting me aside. He would have reached Sir Nicholas's straight, contemptuous back had not Elspeth run to him and stopped him.

"No, Patrick, it is what he wishes. He has done

away with Grandmama somehow, and he wishes us to cloud the matter by bickering with him. Then he may have us all remanded for trespass."

Patrick was still struggling with her when Sir Nicholas looked over his shoulder at us, remarking pleasantly, "I never remand young ladies who visit my household. Only wife-murderers." Then he went into the Hall.

Mrs. Hardwicke and I were shocked at this language, but it was like setting a burning spill to tinder for Patrick Kelleher.

"Look!" he cried to the rest of us. "He calls me murderer. Yet see what we found here in his own park. . . ."

Elspeth stared at the twisted brown morocco leather in his hands, and she was soon joined by Mrs. Hardwicke and her husband, who nodded their heads, easily convinced. But for a reason I did not quite understand, I felt strongly repulsed at the idea of becoming a part of this cabal.

"You see, Kathleen?" Elspeth whispered faintly. "Her shoe. It must have fallen off when he carried her away."

"Perhaps she was walking and lost it," I ventured, hoping desperately that this was the case. But Elspeth would not have it so.

"What could possibly drive her to walk out here in the night, in her bedwrapper, and then to . . . to wander about in her poor bare feet? If she were not dead before, this would—this would . . ."

Patrick had the decency to look ashamed of himself for having presented his evidence quite so crudely and with such triumph. When he put his arm out to console her, she shrugged him off and pleaded with me.

"We must find her. We know now she is not in the house nor the cellars. There is only the moor. She must be out there."

"Lord love us, Miss Elspeth," the housekeeper murmured, shaking her head as she touched the muddy shoe with one hesitant finger. "There be the whole of Heatherton Moor to hide the poor soul in. And His Ludship knowing the moors so well and all."

"But why do you keep saying those things?" I demanded, since Sir Nicholas had walked away like an innocent man, and left me to make his defense. "You've no more proof that he did this than that anyone else had taken Mrs. Sedley away. One of the Hardwickes, for instance."

Mrs. Hardwicke, however, would not stand by for this. "Truly, mum! That'll be the outside of enough! And what for would we be doing harm to the poor lady? It isn't as if we'd had that fierce tongue-lashing from her in the deep night."

I began to suspect there was more to this dreadful business than I had suspected when Elspeth Sedley first complained to me of her grandmother's disappearance. Or perhaps it was simply that Elspeth had considered the implications too horrible to tell me. Even before the Hardwickes answered

me, I knew what to expect. I felt that awful numbness which comes when one is given the death warrant of a friend.

"His Ludship was walking out of the lady's chamber after her attack at dinner, and Ezra and me heard her say, 'You'll burn the Hag's Head when I'm rotting, and not a moment afore.' And then . . . Miss Elspeth, you'll be after telling young Miss the rest. I cannot speak it for what it means."

"Tell me," I repeated, half frantic with wondering. "What was it? What did she say?"

Elspeth had taken the poor, delapidated shoe from Patrick's hand and was caressing it, though it made her dainty fingers all muddy. She did not look at me as she added, "Grandmama said at the last, 'I believe you've always wanted to kill me, because I would not let you marry Megan. But if I live through this night, I'll see you never touch the Hag's Head.' "

"Is that enough?" Patrick asked me, not taunting now, but cold and deliberate and judicial.

I could think of nothing more in Sir Nicholas Everett's defense. Nothing except that whatever his crimes, he had been kind and gentle to me for a few minutes yesterday, and I would never forget those moments.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

"You know why he wishes to burn the inn, do you not?" asked Patrick. "It is to hide away any evidence against his earlier crime. It was very likely our grand magistrate who murdered my poor wife."

"I'm afraid so," Elspeth agreed. The two of them began to argue the possibilities implied by his finding her grandmother's shoe, and no one but me, I thought, cared tuppence for the spirits of the man we had condemned out of hand, in a very un-English way, without a trial. I was mistaken though, when I thought no one cared.

"Oh, Miss," murmured Mrs. Hardwicke, shaking her head, "if you could but think on him as driven! He must have gone quite off his head, thinkin' of her bein' so unhappy and all at the Hag's Head. And it's my thought they'd ought to burn the place down. Sir Nicholas is right on that score, money or no."

I looked toward the Hall. Elspeth and Patrick Kelleher were discussing the time it would take to hitch up the young Sedley mare to the gig so that they might more quickly notify the magistrate of the next parish and conduct a complete search of Heatherton Moor.

"Pothole by pothole," as Patrick added grimly, while Mrs. Hardwicke and I shuddered.

With a quick glance at the others, I whispered to the housekeeper, "I cannot leave him without at the least saying thank you for his care of me. About my foot, I mean. And until they prove—or find something, I think someone ought to believe in him."

"Aye, Miss Kate. You do that."

So, while the others set about with their gruesome thoughts and suspicions, I went back into the Hall, not understanding completely my own feelings that made me wish to offer a parting word to a man who very probably had murdered Mrs. Sedley and may even have murdered her daughter twelve years before. Oddly enough, I felt no fear for myself. The memory of that visit of his as the Hag did not haunt me now, perhaps because it was broad daylight or because I borrowed the sense of safety implied by the presence of Patrick Kelleher and the Hardwickes so close at hand.

I was wandering aimlessly through the groun-floor gallery, trying to become interested in Sir Nicholas's ancestors gleaming at me on the wall while I considered where he himself might be, when he called to me from one of the rooms near the entrance hall.

"Kathleen! What are you doing by yourself there? Do you want to be eaten by the ogre? I'm surprised the good Patrick trusted you with me."

I didn't know what he was talking about, what

he meant, or whether he was entirely sane to say such things, but I turned, thinking I might calm him and assure him of one person's care and interest in him. He came out into the gallery, took my hand, and led me into that room where he had deposited me yesterday afternoon, a lovely, bright, cheerful place with a southern view that included, among other, less forbidding sights, the distant blotch upon the moorland landscape that was the Hag's Head. I sat down obediently upon the elegant but comfortable sofa and expected him to sit down too, but he let go of my hand and walked up and down, occasionally looking out upon the moor.

"I believe you share the general view, that I have somehow made away with Clara Sedley."

"If—if that is so," I said hastily, "I'm sure you had your reasons!"

He laughed and stopped long enough to look down at me and say, "What an equivocal answer! My dear child, what possible reason could I have for spiriting that old woman out of my house in a most inhospitable way and sinking her in the nearest pothole? Well, answer me!"

I began to wish the others were closer at hand, for I did not dare to answer him without exhibiting my knowledge of his duplicity, that masquerade as the Hag, and the fact that he had been exactly where the Hag came from last night. Could I say that I knew he had followed me across the moor yesterday, frightening me half to death, and then miraculously appearing with his man and his dogs

to throw me off my suspicions? Perhaps he did not know that he did these things.

"Sir, it is only that—everyone knows of your quarrels with Mrs. Sedley, and the threats last night. She would never let you burn down the Hag's Head, or even purchase it as you wish to do."

"You may as well ask why Clara does not wish me to do these things. Her evil is considerably greater than mine, ungallant though it is to say so. She married her only daughter off to a detestable sneaking creature who was forever kissing the barmaids behind the kitchen door, pinching the scullery maids, running off for liaisons with them." He paused, staring out at the heath under its morning coat of sunlight, which made it appear blackened and dead. I knew he was reliving these dreadful years when he had been forced to stand back and see the woman he loved destroyed by a man he despised.

"I know, sir. Mrs. Sedley told me she had made a grievous mistake in choosing Patrick above yourself."

He smiled grimly. "But not for the reasons I have given you. Clara's reasons were my title, these estates. Not once did she ever try to free Megan of that disastrous marriage, and Megan was too loyal—or perhaps she loved the rogue, after all."

"Surely it is possible, sir."

"Anything is possible, in love. Why, the day Megan died, I went up there to . . . I would have

killed that rascal with my bare hands. . . . He had struck her, because she made objections to some barmaid or other with whom he had a rendezvous in Heatherton. Yet she prated to me about devotion and marriage vows and the rest of it."

"How dreadful! And after he had struck her!"

"Commonplace—for that fellow. But he will not set foot on my land again, and that I warn you. I mean to have the grounds patrolled and the dogs loosed upon him."

There was a great deal of natural male jealousy in this, I thought to myself, and I wondered if he guessed it. It was quite possible that he did not know of some of the things he did in the night, like that masquerade.

"Well, sir," I said, rising, "the explanation may be that someone in the community is in reality two persons. Someone who does not know that he does these things." Seeing him begin to frown, I added hastily, "Father said that was the case with a fisherman in the cove, back home, who struck his head one night on a rock and was forever doing things afterward that he did not remember."

I thought he was going to be angry, but he seemed to change his mind. He put his hand under my chin and for the barest instant I was afraid he might attempt to choke me. Then, shaking a little under the feeling that he always engendered in me, I felt the light blotted out briefly by his face as he kissed me lightly on the lips, and I, quite for-

getting myself, kissed him back. I could hear someone walk into the room behind Sir Nicholas, but his body hid the intruder from my sight until Sir Nicholas added, with only his eyes smiling, "You see, I know perfectly well what I am doing. Run along. Elspeth is here, armed to the teeth, to rescue you."

Flushed at having been caught in so compromising a situation, I raised my head, fussed with my hair a moment, then walked over to join Elspeth, who said to Sir Nicholas, "And you talk of Uncle Patrick's way with females! I think you are rather before him in that regard, if in nothing else. I intend to find Grandmother, whether she is dead or otherwise. And if she is dead, you shall hang, sir, as you should have hanged for the death of my Aunt Megan . . . all because she would not run away with you that night."

"Bravely said," Sir Nicholas applauded her. "I could only wish Megan had had such noble support upon that last day of her life. . . . Good day for now, Kathleen."

"Goodbye, sir," said I, going out and feeling both excited by his signs of preference and wretched for what I felt we were about to prove against him.

When we reached the gravel path outside the Hall, I said to Elspeth irritably, "I did not need you to play the warder, you know. I am perfectly capable of defending myself."

"Yes, I could see that," she murmured in that

sly way which I felt would have surprised her grandmother. "You know, of course, that there is every reason to believe he really has murdered Grandmother."

"I don't see why," I lied stoutly, as we came in sight of Patrick and the horse and gig. "We don't even know she is dead. She may be wandering about, for some reason of her own."

"Really, Kate, and you called me silly!"

Behind us, we heard Sir Nicholas's purposeful stride upon the gravel, and I paused, hoping against hope that he would say something—anything—that would put him in an innocent light. When I looked around, though, I saw that he had Mrs. Sedley's little tiger-striped cat, Timothy, draped over his hand, and I ran back to take the little fellow from him, thanking him profusely.

He glanced from me to Elspeth, saying in that grave way of his which masked his ironic humor, "You see, I have not eaten your Timothy. Though I was sorely tempted. He scratched down two portieres and made a hopeless jumble of the plants in the conservatory."

"There," I pointed out to Elspeth as we walked through the gate to the high road, "he is quite human, after all. I've no doubt you'll find Mrs. Sedley left of her own will, but nobody has the sense to look for her tracks."

"Her tracks!" said Elspeth impatiently. "What do you think Hardwicke and Uncle Patrick and I have been about this past hour? There are no

tracks through the Hall Park. The walk is gravel, you know."

"Take seat in the gig," said Patrick as he met us outside the east gate. "We've a deal of things to do, and one of them is to send to York and London for Bow Street runners to help locate tracks across the moor, particularly around the region of Everett Hall."

Father had always said the Bow Street runners who did so much police work in London and thereabouts, were "outlanders" when it came to Cornwall and the West County, and that he wouldn't trust one with a single farthing. But there was no doubt that they had done some remarkable work in recovering lost valuables and sometimes in recovering bodies. The idea of a Bow Street runner up in these parts, prowling over the moors like a hound on the scent, made everything seem very immediate and horrible. Perhaps Mrs. Sedley was dead. I very nearly wished they were not calling in the runners.

"Oh, you needn't look so horrified at the thought," Elspeth said, apparently reading my secret dread. "It was Jassy Macrae's idea. After all is said, her husband was killed yesterday, and likely by Nicholas."

I settled Timothy in my lap, for he was vastly uncomfortable and squeaked his protests several times before I remembered him. Then I turned to Patrick Kelleher.

"I suppose this is your idea. You were up at the

Hag's Head when I left yesterday. Did you find your precious treasure?"

For the first time he looked surly, and I thought I saw the expression he must have used with Megan, his wife, when he struck her that last day. I began to dislike him and wonder what Elspeth could possibly see to attract her. Or, indeed, what Megan had seen, to make her give up her relationship with Nicholas Everett for that with Patrick.

"No, I did not. And I looked through both floors and the cellars. But it's not a place I'd care to spend a fortnight in, and that I'll confess to readily!"

"Did you see anything?" Elspeth asked with curiosity as he started to lift her into the gig beside me.

Patrick glanced off in the direction of the Hag's Head but could not see it, since the large main building of Everett Hall stood between us and that sinister view.

"I saw nothing. But I felt . . . I felt a presence." He shrugged, then laughed at himself, and I liked him a trifle better. "I daresay, you'll be shouting from the housetops that I'm the greatest craven who ever lived, but I tell you, if we but had Megan's little savings out of that place, I'd as lief put the torch to it myself! I tell you, there are . . . things . . ." He shivered and laughed. "No matter. You'd not believe what that feeling is. And I've no mind to tell you and be laughed to Bedlam

for my imaginings. At one time I thought I saw—" He broke off and leaped into the little seat beside us, crowding us considerably.

I considered that neither of them knew of my encounter with Sir Nicholas, when he had left those red-mud prints, just as had the Hag who haunted that room of mine; and therefore that they had not so much evidence against him as I, and I was heartily glad of it.

"Perhaps Sir Nicholas is right about wishing to burn down the inn," I ventured.

Patrick's face hardened, and the halo of his hair with the morning sun upon it merely made the mature lines of his face stand out, so that I knew I was dealing with a man who might be as strong-willed as was Sir Nicholas himself.

"I mean to have Megan's savings. They were mine as well. I worked dog-hard for it, and never a farthing did I see except that which she entrusted to me after incessant promises and groveling on my part."

"It was not truly a happy marriage, was it?" I asked, feeling very clever, for he only bore out what Sir Nicholas had said about Megan's disastrous marriage.

"Happy enough, as marriages go happily," he said with a cynical twist to his full lips. "One word between us was enough for the half the county to accuse me, after that night when I came home from Heatherton to find the cellars all afire, and Megan dead in the ruins of them."

"You had friends, and have them," Elspeth reminded him loyally, which annoyed me for some odd reason. "I knew, even as a child, that they lied about you."

"Dearest Beth," he murmured, holding out his hand to her, and they clasped hands before me. I thought of how easy it would be for them to band together and accuse Sir Nicholas of the very thing Patrick was guilty of.

He said then, brushing her hand away with a brisk little slapping gesture, "Ten years I have been away. And still there are those that think me guilty, all because I was having a glass of porter over the taprail in Heatherton. And not even a girl to drink with. She'd gone off with some more likely customer or mistaken the rendezvous."

"You gave Nicholas a perfect chance to quarrel with Aunt Megan and to strike and kill her in a rage," Elspeth put in with horrid insistence. "Yet he has stayed here during these past twelve years with scarcely a shred of suspicion against him."

"There is that which will change; mark me!" said Patrick in such a grim tone that I looked straight ahead and gritted my teeth so as not to make some stupid, illogical defense of Sir Nicholas.

"Look!" cried Elspeth suddenly. "There goes Nicholas now across the moor, and with a gun. Hunting at this hour?"

"A trifle late for hunting, I expect," said Patrick, glancing back over his shoulder at the tall figure

of Sir Nicholas striding over the heath beyond the west gates of Everett Park.

"Perhaps we should . . . see what he is about." Eslpeth suggested, while I held my breath. I was frightened that they might decide to follow him and perhaps catch him in something he could not explain away. I felt that what Sir Nicholas Everett needed was someone to swear to his innocence, or—if it be so—his guilt. But not to be so in the dark as to his real nature. In short, someone rather like myself. But I could not very well leap out of the gig now and, making some preposterous excuse, take off across the moorland in his wake. There must be a plan to it, something logical so that no one would think I had done it merely to protect him by my evidence.

The well-mannered mare, in obedience to Patrick's signal took us rapidly over the high road toward Maidenmoor. Each moment brought us closer to the Bow Street runners, and once they arrived, I thought, there would be no stopping until evidence of one kind or another was found against Sir Nicholas. I only hoped it would never be necessary for me to tell some nasty little thieving runner what I myself had seen and knew about the magistrate of this parish. It seemed dreadful to me that everyone should be aware of these latest forces ranged against him except Sir Nicholas himself.

Elspeth stared out over the moor, frowning. "He's so very clever," she said. "He scarcely came

under suspicion when Aunt Megan died. Consider, Patrick, what if we never find Grandmother? It's so vast out there. There is no end to it. And his position makes him very nearly invulnerable."

"She may also be alive," I said loudly, revealing more anger than I had intended. They both stared at me as though I had taken leave of what senses I had. "What if we find her at home in Maidenmoor? Will you still try to charge Sir Nicholas with some crime or other?"

Patrick laughed abruptly. "I can see that his titles carry weight with more than the old dragon."

"Please," said Elspeth; "don't call her that. Not . . . now."

By this time the road had turned, and we were rolling westward, down toward hilly little Maidenmoor and the inevitable summoning of the Bow Street runners. There must be something that could be done to warn Sir Nicholas so that he might, at the very worst, be prepared for the humiliation and shame of questions, investigations, perhaps even arrest. Yet there was no gainsaying the fact that I was afraid for my own life if Sir Nicholas should suddenly turn into that horrid old Hag before my very eyes.

We reached the place where I had found Patrick and Jassy yesterday afternoon, and I saw the more obscure sheep tracks that led over the moors to the Hag's Head or down under and following a beck that led through Seven Spinney. All I had to do was jump off and walk across the moors to meet

Sir Nicholas and warn him. But I did not take the chance after all. The ugly truth is, I too was afraid of him.

By the time we reached Maidenmoor and saw the numbers of local people million about in front of the big parish church beyond the graveyard, I knew what it was. Jassy Macrae was there, with her husband's body, and there was a burying.

Elspeth groaned at sight of it. "Oh, no! By midday they will all be drunk as lords. There's the arval that does it every time there's a burying."

In spite of her husband's death or, more likely, because of it, as the custom was, Jassy Macrae had the Owl of York Tavern open to accommodate the local men at the arval. It was a custom familiar to me in Cornwall under a different name, I soon saw, and like the Irish wake, but perhaps with more and stronger free liquor, if possible. And after every arval there were quarrels, brawls, and fights. In the end, the only one who got any peace out of it all was the person in the rough-hewn box that served as a coffin. Mrs. Famblechook and Meg Markham, both in black with heavy shawls over their heads, came out of the Owl of York, walking almost too firmly up to the church, and I guessed by Meg's careful handling of her companion that the cook had borrowed a male's prerogative to have herself a few drinks before the arval even started.

Patrick let us out in front of Sedley House. "I'll be getting off to York at once. We should have a

runner here by tomorrow at the latest if he takes the York Mail."

I did not want to hear about it and descended even before he could help me, carrying the squirming Timothy looped over my arm upside-down.

After a moment's low-voiced conversation with Patrick, Elspeth hurried in after me and up to Mrs. Sedley's bed-sitting-room, calling her grandmother's name all the way up, in a voice that was harrowing in the extreme. For all we knew, Clara Sedley would be in a wooden box tomorrow, and there would be the same milling throng about the church, with Elspeth and me as mourners. I had hoped against hope that we would find Mrs. Sedley snug in her bed at home, though how this might have been accomplished I could not imagine.

Elspeth had hurried out to run after Patrick and tell him that their suspicions were very likely right, when Meg Markham came in with Mrs. Famblechook, who was sobbing noisily and hanging upon Meg's strong arm.

"Meg," I said, "you haven't seen Mrs. Sedley since yesterday, have you?"

"No, Miss. She said some'ut as how she'd have herself took to the inn, to see if it could be made habitable for your young ladies. But that was to be today." She was turning from me to provide a handkerchief for the sobbing, hiccuping Mrs. Famblechook, when she added in a puzzled tone, "Miss, you wouldn't credit the kind of tale that's told these days."

"What do you mean?"

"Seems as how them as come across Heatherton Moor for the arval today, talk of seein' a female as like to the mistress as makes no matter. And awalking she was. Awalking and arunning, all hunched over like it give her pain to do so."

This was marvelous news. It would go far to negate all the present suspicions that Sir Nicholas had snatched her away and buried her in some boggy place on the moor.

"Yes, Meg. Where?"

"It's what I don't credit above half, myself, Miss. Seems as if it was on the sheep track to the Hag's Head, just above the rise on Seven Spinney."

"What time? What time, Meg!"

She was bewildered at my vehemence and so confused at it that she let Mrs. Famblechook go. The wretched cook wheeled away onto the love seat in the passage at the foot of the stairs, with only little Tomothy to comfort her.

"Why, now, Daniel Fuller said it was close on dawn. Maybe earlier. Dan'l set out for Maidenmoor at half after midnight, for to be in time for the arval and all. He's got a sheepcote on Heatherton Moor."

Elspeth came back onto the staircase and asked us what we were arguing so loudly about.

"About your grandmother," I said, cold, crisp, and clear. "About the person you said Sir Nicholas dropped into some muddy grave on the moor. She

has been seen *walking*—mind you!—upon the sheeptrack up to the inn."

Elspeth looked from one to the other of us. She was very pale, and when she spoke, all the confident, slightly superior manner was gone.

"That is impossible. Grandmother would never walk so far."

Meg shrugged. "Well, Miss, that's the story being told. The MacLaidlaw saw her, same as Dan'l Fuller, and them is folk with mighty sharp eyes. And we do know the mistress was *that* put about to get to the inn herself. Maybe she just walked off in her sleep."

I had a wonderful idea, and logical, I thought. "I think she went to the Hag's Head to look for her daughter's savings. The money both she and Mr. Kelleher and the Macrae have been wanting to find."

"I tell you, it would only be the most extreme matter that would ever get Grandmother upon her feet for so long a walk." Elspeth looked around as though hoping to find Mrs. Sedley suddenly sitting up in that comfortable bed of hers, giving us our orders in her sugar-sweet voice.

I said, "If we can get a man to go with us, I am perfectly willing to walk up to the Hag's Head and prove Meg's story is true. That is where we will find Mrs. Sedley, and I daresay she may even have walked up there in a kind of sleepwalking, which I've heard of people doing at times."

Elspeth murmured thoughtfully, "That would

certainly explain the nightrobe, and the stout shoes for walking. She meant to walk about Everett Hall for some reason we do not yet know, and then some thing—*some thing*—made her follow on up to the Hag's Head, either in pursuit, or in a state of mental confusion. I must get Patrick before he leaves for York."

She rustled down the stairs, through the passage, and out onto the street. I went to the window of Mrs. Sedley's room and watched her until she was out of sight down the hill, past the graveyard. She was gone several minutes before I saw her hurrying up the hill again, but still alone; she must have been too late to fetch up Patrick Kelleher. She hesitated in front of the Owl of York, where so many of the black-clad men of the district were coming and going. Then she disappeared within. Remembering my own experience in there, I did not envy her, and I wasn't surprised when she hurried out a few minutes later. I ran downstairs to meet her at the door.

"It's no use," she burst out, still breathing hard from her run. "Uncle Patrick left a few minutes ago. Gone to order up a runner, you know. I tried to get one of the men in the tavern, but of course, they will not leave while the drinking is free. What on earth shall we do?"

"Why, go ourselves, of course," said I, surprised at her hesitation.

"Yes, but it will take so much longer by the high road if we use the horse and gig. And yet, if we take

the sheep track, we will not be able to bring Grandmother back ourselves. And she will be so tired. That is," she added, with one of her heavy-lidded looks at Meg that boded no good for Mrs. Sedley's maid, "if what you say is true, that they have seen her."

"Well, then," I said, having given it some thought. "You must take the gig and the horse, and I will go over the moor trail." I had my reasons for this arrangement, for I suspected that Sir Nicholas might conceivably have been headed for the inn when we saw him this morning. If so, I hoped to stop him before he entered the inn and quarreled with Mrs. Sedley again over the inn's destruction.

I guessed from her manner that Elspeth was confused, so many ideas being presented at once, and without her beloved Uncle Patrick to bolster her. But apparently, whatever troubled her was resolved, because she nodded, and when I had changed my shoes and put on an older coat, we went out upon the street together, she to have the mare harnessed again, and I to take the straight sheep trail over the heath and the rising moor to the Hag's Head, this time without little Timothy to confuse my path—or, indeed, to warn me, in his feline fashion, when ghosts and haunts were abroad.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

I WAS MUCH more familiar with the various criss-crossing sheep trails by this time, and I could take what I felt fairly confident was the correct path, while stifling a yawn or two; for the last night had scarcely been a period of much sleep for any of us at Everett Hall. However, though I yawned as I climbed the first rise above the hill-hugging village of Maidenmoor, I was not in the least sleepy but keyed to higher and higher nervous excitement. I knew that if I was able to reach a normal and clear-headed Sir Nicholas before Elspeth arrived with the conveyance to assist Mrs. Sedley, I must warn him of the difficulties about to be thrown in his way.

As I walked, huddling my throat and jaw closer into my coat collar against the winds of morning, I tried to reason out this idiotic obsession of mine that Sir Nicholas must be warned. My eyes and my wits had told me on several occasions that he might well be guilty of trying to frighten people into the very sort of accident that Macrae had met with yesterday. Why, then, did such "accidents" seem more the result of feminine trick than the weapon of a very masculine mind like that of Sir

Nicholas? He might even have been the murderer of Megan Sedley long ago when she would not leave her husband and go away with him.

Yet within my heart at this moment, I did not really believe that the man who was so gentle with me, who made me feel so protected and so admiring, could possibly be a murderer. Such is often the case, I believe, when one is kindly treated by another human being, more especially if that human being is well endowed and extremely handsome. I suppose that is how murderers often commit their crimes with such ease.

I had been thinking so deeply of my own responsibility for further crimes if I warned Sir Nicholas, that I had already climbed up around the little ridge where I had met the injured Macrae yesterday. The poor man! Was I actually becoming responsible for other such "accidents" caused, as I felt sure, by Macrae's sudden and shocking sight of the Hag? And was the Hag actually an absurd but horrible disguise of Sir Nicholas, for purposes of his own, which must be more serious than the mere desire to obtain the inn and burn it to the ground? My foosteps faltered for the first time since I had left Maindenmoor. I felt keenly aware of the many dangers involved in my keeping secret my knowledge of Sir Nicholas. Yet he had been kind to me, and gentle, and so very much what any romantic young woman would dream about of nights.

I think it was my first good glimpse of the Hag's

Head Inn, over across the intervening sea of dead black heather, that made me suddenly and terribly frightened, both for Sir Nicholas and of him. Before going on, I resolved to move warily from here, to tell him about the runners and warn him of the risks if he seemed in the mood he had generally used toward me since yesterday. If, however, he was up to some more deviltry, I would tell Elspeth and the others when they came and forestall further crimes. In this way, I hoped to salve my own conscience, both in what I owed to the people of the district and in what I owed to this man who had shown me, at moments, such kindness and tenderness.

I did not have long to wait before carrying out one or the other of my plans. As I walked around the hillock where I had met Macrae, and then picked out what I could see was the right sheep-track leading off across country toward the inn, I made out a tall figure far in the distance, somewhat to the north and east, and felt reasonably sure it was Sir Nicholas on the last part of his walk from Everett Hall toward the Hag's Head. I hurried along, hoping the prickly heather and furze would hide my figure from his sight until I knew what my own actions must be. I did not yet know how I should prevent his meeting Mrs. Sedley within the Hag's Head, if that was where we would find her, but I did think that if I appeared at the same time, playing the pesky intruder I actually was, both Mrs. Sedley and Sir Nicholas would find it difficult

to quarrel, for whatever else they might be, they were gentlefolk and knew what was expected of them in the way of good manners.

I could see that Sir Nicholas was going to reach the Hag's Head before I did, for he had taken a shorter route than I expected, directly through the furze and up over the brow of a hill, which brought him out very close to the broken gate of the inn. He stood there at least a full minute, with his gun across his arm, before he lowered it casually and studied the façade of the old building.

Meanwhile, I picked up some time by cutting across the endless sheep tracks, losing sight of him and of the inn for a short time as I crossed through a dell where I was temporarily delayed by a herdsman and his flock. The man greeted me in friendly fashion, contrary to all I had heard of these lonely and self-sufficient people. As I was trying to pass him and his curly flock, he asked me if I had come from Maidenmoor, and then said sadly, "Ay, but if he'd been a male now, love, ye'd be where I'm wishing I was. At the Owl of York for the grand arval."

I smiled and hurried on, reflecting that he was probably not as hard of heart as he sounded, for a funeral celebration like the arval was in all likelihood the only "pleasant" happening in his hard and dreary life.

I had lost sight of Sir Nicholas, though, and I assumed that he had entered the old building. This made me excessively nervous, and I began to run

so fast that I knew I would be in no case to interfere between Mrs. Sedley and Sir Nicholas if I were this out of breath. When I began to climb that last little ridge where I would be plainly seen by anyone in the building, I had to stop and go carefully around to a corner of the inn where there were no windows and where I would be masked by the outbuildings, at least until I reached the small areaway between the stables and the inn itself. I huddled in the shadow on the west side of the stillroom.

There was not a sound of any kind from the Hag's Head as it loomed there before me, with the dark stains of the ancient fire still visible around the stone foundations. What on earth was Sir Nicholas doing in the old building? Had he met Mrs. Sedley? The silence reassured me only to the extent that I knew they were not quarreling—if, of course, Mrs. Sedley actually had reached this place of her daughter's unhappiness and murder. I thought of all the barmaids and upstairs maids whom Megan's husband had lured into sordid relationships of one kind or another, even on the day of Megan's murder, and I wondered how I could ever have thought Patrick Kelleher was in the least an attractive person, whether in appearance or in manner. How superior, by comparison, was Sir Nicholas, if only I could be quite sure that he was not about to commit some terrible crime while under the influence of this sick and diseased old building!

Not a shadow, not even a mere flicker of light and darkness, crossed those windows of the Hag's Head, where any persons inside might give me an indication that I was being watched, and yet, the instant I thought of this sinister possibility, I became convinced that there was someone there peering down at me. Surely, I thought, if it were Sir Nicholas who was watching me unseen in this fashion I should not be so frightened. Was it possible that someone else, or some *thing* else, was up on those top floors, waiting for me to blunder into the web?

I took a deep breath, calmed myself, and slipped across the intervening space between the out-buildings and the scullery of the kitchen. I was not an instant too soon. I had scarcely reached the door, which stood ajar, before I heard someone approaching the door. Then Sir Nicholas appeared. There was nowhere to hide except behind the door, and I only prayed that he would not slam it shut, exposing me in my hiding-place. I was shocked at his face, of which I had caught a glimpse as he stepped out onto the path. His normal healthy pallor was accentuated by the darkness of his eyes. He looked exactly as he had when I first met him in this house—strange, forbidding and quite capable of terrifying me if he ever turned that look upon me.

He must have quarreled with Mrs. Sedley after all, and if so, why did we hear nothing from her?

I could scarcely wait until he had disappeared

around the corner of the old building before I went inside, first through the scullery, and then across the ancient kitchen with its scattered foods, as though the rats had been busy among the flour and salted meats. Gypsies must have been camping in the house since I was through these regions a day before. There were signs everywhere of foods that had been carelessly used, the remains left for the rats. I made out Sir Nicholas's footprints through the spilled flour, but when I stepped into the hall there were no longer any signs of his having been here. And what was even more alarming, there was, as yet, no sign of Mrs. Sedley.

I moved quickly along the hall, seeing myself, windblown and stiff with apprehension, in that pier glass set against the staircase in the distance. It was on that staircase, I remembered suddenly, that Macrae and I had seen the Hag, or what we thought was the Hag, the last sight poor Macrae ever looked upon.

Perhaps I should wait outside until Elspeth came. My steps slowed. I felt quite cowardly about venturing further. Was it possible that Sir Nicholas had left Mrs. Sedley somewhere in the upper regions of the Hag's Head after their quarrel? If so, her silence could mean only one dreadful thing. Why must he have this abominable murderous temper, this cold, white fury? I felt sure that but for his temperament, he would be a kindly and great-hearted man, well suited to the position he occupied as justice of the peace. But if he had, in-

deed, committed crimes here in the parish, how much more shocking that he should be in command of such power!

I was sick with dread of the quarrel that must have occurred between him and Mrs. Sedley to produce that look upon his face; yet there was nothing for it but to go outside and wait like a sensible person. I was not a Bow Street runner. I did not intend that any evidence of mine should be used against him. It was even possible—no, probable—that Mrs. Sedley had not reached the inn. I would do better to follow the one of the sheeptracks down to Seven Spinney and over to Everett Hall. It was very strange, though, if this was the case, that Sir Nicholas had not found her on his way to the inn.

I reached the pier glass and glanced across the main passage of the inn at the open taproom where Macrae had died. At this moment my reflection in the pier glass shivered. I stopped and stared.

It did not surprise me that my reflection had caught the terror I felt within, but when I put my hand out to steady myself, I felt the mirror frame shivering in my fingers. I remained completely still and looked up at the ceiling. The pier glass, and not my image, had shivered in that odd way, indicating some movement on the floor above. I had missed the sound the first time because I myself had been walking, and the creak of the boards around me had deafened me to the slight noises above the stairs. Someone else was in the house, someone living, walking.

She must be upstairs. Hiding? Why had she not come out when I entered? No. She was very likely hunting for the poor little cache of Megan Kelleher's savings.

To satisfy my nagging worry about her, I called out suddenly, paying the penalty by finding my voice soft and wavering, scarcely audible at the far end of the passage. This was nonsense. I called very loudly, "Mrs. Sedley! I know you are here. Please answer me."

I waited then, and it seemed to my overwrought and tense imagining that faint sounds abovestairs ceased almost at the second that my voice died away. As though, my fears told me, someone was suddenly grown cautious and secretive, hoping to lurk there unheard and unsuspected while I wandered around down here, playing the silly fool in my search. At the same time I knew that Sir Nicholas had been in this house long enough to have investigated anyone or anything upstairs and would scarcely have left something dangerous there without a guard.

Having fortified myself with this reasoning I further built up my courage by stepping into the taproom and picking up the bottle I had broken the day Macrae died. Was that only yesterday? An eon ago! And then with this weapon I began to mount the stairs. They creaked underfoot, and I remembered Sir Nicholas's warning to me the first time we met, when he had frightened me by speaking out of the darkness of the old building. These stairs

did seem old and untrustworthy, and I had no desire to fall into that cellar below.

I paused, instinctively looked behind me, and saw that spot where Macrae had died in my arms. Several steps more brought me to that shadowy and uncertain area at the top of the steps where Macrae and I had both fancied we saw the Hag regarding us in that silent, malevolent way. I saw nothing on the landing that could arouse such fancies, and I felt that this was because the real Hag did not exist beyond the dreadful skill of Sir Nicholas, and I had seen him leave the building. Still, I looked around before taking the upstairs corridor to my right, where I had heard the sounds, and I called out, losing my temper over my own uneasiness, "Mrs. Sedley! I hear you and I mean to show Elspeth where you are! You may as well show yourself."

Up here in this part of the house which had received some of the smoke from that ancient fire, I found the echo of my voice much more unnerving than it had been downstairs. And because the ceilings were permeated with that smoke along with twelve years' accumulation of dust, I began to fancy faint floating images everywhere at a distance from me. I opened the first door on my right. It was dark inside, because the shutters were closed, and being on the west side of the building, it did not catch the bright morning light. But when I had stared into the room a few seconds, I was able to make out various articles of furniture, shrouded

by some good Samaritan after the fire. The room itself, I thought, might serve very well for a school bedchamber, providing we could exorcise the nasty feeling up here of ghosts and other unwanted visitors. I could see that the room had formerly been a bedchamber for guests of the inn, and although I removed only the nearest cover from a ladder-backed chair by the door, I thought even some of the furniture might be put to use. However, my removal of the cover had caused such a flurry of dust, and the running of tiny feet, which I hoped were only those of mice, that I left the room in haste and went on through the passage.

In every room it was the same, but now I could see a man's bootprints in the dust and assumed these were either Sir Nicholas's or those Patrick Kelleher had left yesterday. There were other dusty prints, but they were indefinable, and when I remembered the many times during the past twelve years that this place had been used as a haven by gypsies and other wanderers, besides those searching for Megan's savings, I was not surprised at the marks.

I was standing in the passage with the door of an east room open so that the sunlight would illuminate those dusty dark areas on the floor of the hall, when I became distinctly aware of those tapping sounds again, just as I had heard that first day when Timothy and I had been so very much aware of moving things that existed abovestairs. I could

not place the sound, and began to suspect that Mrs. Sedley was leading me some kind of chase through the house, higher and higher until I should, perhaps, corner her in one of the attics. It was an unsavory thought. When I could not hear the tap-tap sound again, I crossed the east room and looked out, hoping to catch sight of Elspeth and the horse and gig.

There was nothing in sight. I paused, taking a deep breath, aware of a peculiar crawling sensation over my body as though all the silent, evil things of darkness were crowding in upon me. As I turned away from the window and for a second was blinded by the darkness behind me after the bright sunlight, I thought a mist floated in the air past the doorway and along that dark, musty corridor I had just quitted. If this was Mrs. Sedley, playing off some fantastic game with me, I meant to tell her what I thought of her tricks and leave this place and this countryside forever!

With this furious intention I ran through the room to the passage. It was so dark, after the light I left behind me, that I made out nothing, and I groped my way along the passage to the next easterly room, trying the latch and throwing the door open. Nothing was there, of course, but by now I had summoned up enough courage to cross the passage and look into the rest of the dark rooms on the west side of the building.

Thus I came to the last room on the southwest corner of the building, a room larger than

the others, with windows facing both the south and the west, although the shutters were still locked. The room was sparsely furnished, and I could see only a large, unwieldy wardrobe of heavy dark wood and, across the room, a four-poster bed whose hangings looked as though the rats had been at them, all chewed and shredded into lace. A bar of light came through one of the south shutters, which had warped with the many years of disuse and foul weather, and through that bar of light I could see the spider webs, attaching the fourth post to the window. I knew that the sly woman who was apparently giving me this chase throughout her daughter's house was not in this room, for I could see that although the bed clothing was still on the bed in a great, jumbled heap, she herself was nowhere around. I half expected her to jump out at me from behind the door and peered around in a gingerly way, but there was nothing.

With a firm pace that helped me to hide my growing uneasiness, I crossed the room to the big wardrobe, set down the wine bottle that had been my weapon, and with a mighty gesture swung the two doors open at once. No one was hiding in there. I ransacked the clothing, finding several gowns and coats of a style common to young ladies, including my mother, around 1800 or thereabouts, which I supposed had belonged to poor Megan Sedley, and I realized this room must have been the master bedroom. There was no object of furniture in the room except the bed, but that was

so dusty and so entwined with cobwebs that I felt I could scarcely breathe without opening one of the windows, even though the shutters beyond were still locked. I crossed the room, putting my hands ahead of me to avoid cobwebs, and beside the large, disheveled bed I started to open the window. I did not immediately complete the act. Staring at me from the top of those disheveled, yet somehow carefully arranged, bedclothes, were the enormous, dead eyes of Clara Sedley, their gaze reflecting the same vision that must have given the rest of her too-sweet,too-round face its bloated look of indescribable horror.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

FOR THE first minute or two I was aware only of a most intense fear that I would be overwhelmed, bound and held prisoner by these spider webs which dangled from the rotting tester of the bed. There were no spiders though, and the webs had all been broken. Broken by whoever had placed Mrs. Sedley upon this bed. Or had she died on the bed, her heart failing her at the last, when she saw . . . what?

Then I began to feel alive again. It seemed that the faint warmth of my blood returned to my veins, and with a great effort I turned away from the bed, reached for the window in the other wall, and tried to open it. But the lock was rusted, and with an access of fury I had not even suspected in myself, I slipped off one of my shoes and hammered outward at one of the small window panes. When it was open, the edges jagged and catching the light, I pushed open the shutters through the space afforded by that broken pane and breathed the crisp, sharp air. I felt an extraordinary faintness, not like myself at all. I thought, *If I do not look at the bed, it will not be there.* . . .

How she must have suffered, this poor, crippled

old woman trying to defend her right to the little horde left by her daughter! As long as I lived, I knew, I would never forget that dying look on her face and in her pale eyes or the careful way she had been laid out among the bedclothing—doubtless by Sir Nicholas, as I thought—with her gnarled hands folded just under the edge of the coverlet.

I reasoned it out as I leaned against the window frame, shaking and dreadfully weak. The passage outside this room creaked oddly, as old houses creak when exposed to sudden air, and I screamed, and before I could control myself, I screamed again. When I could get hold of myself, I made my way across the room, feeling my knees buckle but reaching the door so that I could lean against it and stare into that musty half-dark. A large, fat, long-tailed rat scurried across my stocking, and I screamed again.

After what seemed a very long time I became aware of the freezing-cold sweat upon my face. I could not find my handkerchief and took my coat sleeve and passed its welcome roughness over my face. Then I did what I should have done immediately. I fumbled my way out through the long, dim corridor toward the main staircase, intending to wait there for Elspeth. All the while, I was confusedly debating in my mind what I should tell her, whether I must mention having seen Sir Nicholas here and departing in that odd way, with that dreadfully guilty look. But, of course, I must tell her. And the Bow Street runners.

How could he do such a thing, that man who was so kind to me and so gentle, so much the superior person I had always known I would love someday? Perhaps I loved him yet. But Mrs. Sedley was dead of that meeting between them, and I believed in justive even more than I believed in Nicholas Everett.

I was moving down the stairs, my limbs trembling beneath me, when a shadow crossed the floor in front of the taproom, and I clutched the balustrade and cried out. A tall man stepped to the foot of the staircase from the darkness of the lower floor passage and mounted the stairs toward me.

"Wait where you are, Kathleen. Don't go on."

"I've d-done so," I stammered. "I saw her."

He took the stairs then two at a time, and before I could withdraw, he drew me to him, murmuring in the most comforting way, "Don't cry, sweetheart. Don't cry."

"Why did you come back?" I demanded, crying so hard I could scarcely understand myself. He seemed to understand, though he may have wondered why I asked the question.

"I heard you screaming, of course. And I thought—God knows what I thought! But I knew it must be you. No one else could venture into quite so many dangerous places within three days!"

I thought with dread that he must be completely mad to speak in this way, as though he might almost smile at me while upstairs lay the body of the

woman with whom he had fatally quarreled. Why had he not cared for her and gone for help?

Somewhere on the heath outside the Hag's Head, Elspeth called my name sharply, and I broke away from Nicholas, flushed and ashamed of having yielded to the temptation of his arms.

"It's Elspeth! She is sure to guess what happened. She was bringing the gig and the mare by the high road, in the event Mrs. Sedley was here."

He surprised me by saying calmly, "Yes, I know. I met her. And the gig. She had overturned it attempting to cross the moor instead of going around the Heatherton Turn."

"Yes, but is she . . . ?"

"She and the gig, and the mare, by the way, are right as trivets, but I shall have to carry Mrs. Sedley out to the high road, I'm afraid. Go on out to Elspeth while I fetch the poor creature."

"How did it happen? I mean, how did she die?" I asked as he pushed me gently but briskly down the stairs.

"Of fright, I should imagine. She was carefully laid out by whatever—or whoever—frightened her."

I looked at him. Was he completely unaware of his own part in her death?

"Do not think of it, Kathleen. Go along like a good child. You will hear all about it later."

At the bottom of the staircase I waited nervously, watching him disappear along the upstairs

corridor, wondering what his thoughts were and if he would remember to conceal any signs that he himself had been responsible for what I assumed to be the heart seizure or shock that had resulted in Mrs. Sedley's death.

Elspeth came to the outside door near the taproom and forced it partly open. "Is it you, Kate?"

"Yes. You know about your grandmother?"

There was a trifling pause. I saw Elspeth's eyes regarding me through the narrow aperture made by the forcing of the door.

"He told me. Where is he?"

"Upstairs. He has gone to fetch her."

"I mean to return with Patrick," she said in a cold, crisp voice that made me shiver for Nicholas's fate. "There will be signs."

"Hush," I whispered. "He is coming."

It was not only that which disturbed me. I did not want to hear more from her. I felt that she might well be right. There would be things, signs. He would have no chance when Patrick Kelleher brought back a runner. I was still thinking this when Sir Nicholas started down the stairs carrying the ancient, dusty coverlet carefully wrapped so that I could not see its contents. Poor Mrs. Sedley! To be brought to her coffin in these ancient trappings!

"Come along behind me and close the door," he ordered me as he carried the dead woman along the lower hall to the kitchen entrance.

Then I thought of Elspeth's remark and won-

dered what evidence the runner and her precious uncle Patrick would find to implicate Sir Nicholas in deliberate murder. Did Elspeth suppose he had murdered her in the night and then brought her here? But there were the mourners at the Owl of York Tavern who would testify that they had seen Mrs. Sedley climb the hill across the moor from Seven Spinney to the Hag's Head. That would save him from condemnation.

Elspeth had come around to the scullery and met us as Nicholas carried Mrs. Sedley through the kitchen. As he brushed by us, something touched me, cold as dead flesh, and both Elspeth and I saw that Mrs. Sedley's feet were both bare. I felt Elspeth's recoil but said nothing, hoping she had not noticed.

But she cried, "Her shoe! Her poor foot will be cold."

"I must have dropped it," Nicholas said as he maneuvered his burden out of the door. "Kathlen, would you bring it along?"

"Yes, of course." I hurried back into the passage, anxious to be of use, to be away from Elspeth's accusing eyes and her cold, judicial manner with Sir Nicholas.

I was feeling a trifle better now when I reflected that so far as anyone might ever know, Mrs. Sedley had wandered up to the Hag's Head herself, despite her rheumatic condition, and there dragged herself to that bed and died of her exertions. Only I, and, of course, Sir Nicholas, knew of that dread-

ful expression, the awful thing her dying eyes must have witnessed in the last pitiful seconds of her life. And only I knew that her body, among the bedclothing, had appeared to be carefully laid there by someone, which made me suspect that she had not died in that bed.

I felt very little fear of this old building now as I peered through the murky darkness trying to find that lost shoe, but I did feel the sadness of the place and wondered how it must have been all those years ago for the unhappy Megan Kelleher, knowing all the while that her husband was carrying on flirtations and worse under this very roof and with her own servants.

At the foot of the main staircase I found a little cloth rosette off Mrs. Sedley's night robe and wondered again what terrible impetus had driven the painfully crippled woman to rush out of Everett Hall and across the moor to the Hag's Head. Small wonder that her confrontation with Sir Nicholas in this house had killed her!

Having found the little rosette, I was more encouraged to mount the stairs without fear, carefully studying the floorboards themselves and expecting with every step to pick up Mrs. Sedley's mud-encrusted shoe. Nevertheless, finding myself in the upper floor passage, I would have been greatly relieved to pick up the shoe and run out of the grim old house to join Sir Nicholas and Elspeth —if, of course, Elspeth had gone with Nicholas. As I made my way through the murky, dust-filled cor-

ridor, I wondered why such an idea had occurred to me. Elspeth had gone along immediately after Sir Nicholas. Before I could stop myself, I began to speculate upon the singular and horrid influence of these walls upon both Macrae and Mrs. Sedley. Had it actually been the presence of Sir Nicholas, perhaps in that mad disguise of the Hag, that caused Macrae to trip on the stairs and crack his head? And had Nicholas's quarrel with Mrs. Sedley resulted in her death from shock? If she had seen the eerie Hag disguise it might have proved sufficient.

I had reached the bedchamber at the south end of the corridor before I saw Mrs. Sedley's now dilapidated shoe, accidentally kicked aside, a little beyond the foot of the bed. Trying not to look at that bed or remember its burden, I stooped over to pick up the shoe and strike it against the nearest bedpost to remove some of the crusted mud. The sound of those vigorous slaps echoed through the ancient walls, making the silence that followed even more pronounced.

It was during this silence, as I had my conscious thoughts upon the shoe, scratching off bits of mud and dust, that I recalled the "game" I had supposed Mrs. Sedley was playing with me scarcely half an hour ago, through these very halls. There had been those slight sounds overhead, among these rooms, punctuated by the tap-tap that I had supposed to be the cane she used. What was there to explain them, and why had I heard nothing

since? It may have been scurrying rats, I told myself, or some loose shutter banging or other field animals in the attics close under the eaves. But now, since I had returned upstairs alone, there had been no sound at all except my hammering of the shoe against the bedpost.

There are moments in one's life when the silence is so great that it seems as massive as a blanket laid over the world, and in the heart of that silence one is perfectly aware of being stared at. I knew this sensation vividly now and raised my head so slowly that I felt that the movement was dictated by my extreme apprehension. The musty darkness of the passage outside the bedchamber took form like a gathering of dust and as Mrs. Sedley's shoe trembled in my fingers, I saw the Hag materialize before me in the doorway.

This was not a ghost, I reminded myself as I felt the beginning of that icy terror which stiffened my body so that I could not move. This was Sir Nicholas, or even Elspeth—*someone* masquerading. But it would not destroy me as it had destroyed two others in as many days as it brought about the sounds and the weird lights and all that made the Hag's Head a haunt of legend and horror. I could not make it out clearly, for the cloak with its attached hood was such that it seemed to borrow the dense, murky look of the passage itself. But it was there, and it was real. All these thoughts steeled my courage. I had only to walk toward it, brave it out; and if the creature meant violence, I would

scream. Either Nicholas or Elspeth must hear me, for they could not both be in on this scheme of terror.

"I know you," I said, smiling such a smile as must have looked like a grimacing mask to the Hag, whose garments swayed ever so slightly in the foul air of the passage. "Someone is waiting for me. You must let me pass or they will catch and unmask you."

Still no sound from the Hag. I was closer now and could see the ancient, horribly wrinkled flesh that was the mask. I could scarcely believe that, somewhere within, eyes stared at me; yet I knew by the crawling sensation over my body that I was being watched, and from that dreadful face.

If it touches me, I thought, *I shall snatch at the mask and see the creature for what she is—the real face, the smooth, clever, evil face of her beneath!*

I was therefore prepared when the clawed fingers went out to me, as they had gone out last night in the bedchamber at Everett Hall—and perhaps later, in that locked room—ready to tear at my throat or to smother me. With all my strength I pushed my hands into that face, tearing at something that was papery, parchment, ancient flesh. This was what lay behind the mask. It was no mask, but the once-human flesh itself.

The Hag was real!

I screamed . . . and screamed . . . and felt

the claws at my throat, which was raw with screaming, and tore myself away and stumbled along the passage, fighting my way against the gathering gloom, hearing now the tap-tap of a cane behind me. It seemed to my dazed fancy that the Hag took form everywhere, wherever there was any gathering of dirt and age and dust, and at last I fell as I reached the landing above the staircase. As I stared up at this monstrous thing looming over me, I saw it by the light from the partially open door far below me beyond the taproom. And I guessed in that awful moment what had happened.

I no longer recognized what had been my intense terror, for during those past seconds it had become a revulsion, an awakening to a truth more horrible, more sickening that anything I could have imagined, and in it was a shred of pity. I could whisper at last as the Hag bent over me, groping for my throat with those bony parchment hands.

"Please . . . I understand. You are Megan Sedley. It was someone else they found in the cellars. Someone else who died. . . ." And then, as my own shaking fingers tried to push her away, I knew what had driven Mrs. Sedley to run out of Everett Hall and up that long, incredible way to the Hag's Head Inn and what, in the end, had given her face that terrible look. She had seen her daughter roaming through the corridors of Sir Nicholas's house last night, and she had followed

the wretched creature back to her lair in the Hag's Head, where Megan Sedley lived, a prisoner of her own horror.

Out of the parchment mask that was no mask came the hoarse whisper from deep in the throat of Megan Sedley, "I killed you once, there in the cellar, when I caught you waiting for Patrick. Snug you were, with nothing but a candle to witness your obscene tricks with him. . . . You didn't know, when I killed you, that I meant to kill Patrick when he came home. And then I could go to Nicholas. My own Nicholas! . . . But it wasn't enough that the fire should start, and me trapped with you. You had to come back. First Elspeth, then you, and try for Nicholas's love. He won't love you, though. . . . He'll never love anyone but Megan . . . lovely Megan. . . . That is how he thinks of her. . . ."

I felt the extremes of weakness born of my awful pity for her, a pity so great that it was all I could do to wrench her hands away from me while I crawled back, moving along under the balustrade high above the entrance hall.

"Don't make me—hurt you," I pleaded, unaware until now that my hands were wet with my own tears. There were sounds, as though the walls around us creaked with the changing currents of air, and the Hag kicked at me, driven to new fury by the sounds. Her physical power was dreadful, a pure hatred born of a dozen years of hiding, the while her own "murder" remained unsolved. I

was forced to use all my strength to evade her. The dreadful Hag's face was close to mine as she bent over me and tried to thrust me away from her, over the balustrade, but I steeled myself to withstand her, praying that I need not kill this poor, hideous, demented thing. But she was so strong, so terribly strong . . .

"Silly barmaid! I nearly killed you last night. But there was always someone—something. And they must not see me. They would tell him. When you are gone, he will never know. There will never be anyone else for him but Megan Sedley. . . ."

I took tight hold of the balustrade, which shook under my hand, as I warded her off with the other hand. I began to feel that slow seeping away of strength that meant I could not long withstand her maniacal force.

Suddenly, as I felt the ancient balustrade begin to give away behind me with a cracking and splitting of wood, a man's voice called out, with a shock and anguish I had never thought possible to the cold, calm Nicholas Everett. "Megan!"

Her scream will haunt me as long as I live. Then, before my eyes, the Hag drew back, raising the clawed fingers to ward off a sight from the foot of the stairs, and as I dragged myself out of the way of the balustrade, she rushed past me, thrust her hands at the breaking wood, and with enormous impetus, threw herself over the now unprotected landing to the floor far below.

I covered my face and tried to regain control of myself. All was silent below.

Gradually, I felt more myself, and I moved to the edge of the broken balustrade and looked over. Nicholas was kneeling where Megan Sedley had fallen. His dark head was bowed over the poor bundle of ancient rags that he cradled in his arms. She must have died instantly, and I felt that nothing remained of the fragile, hideous phantom but the memory of the other—the lost love of his youth.

CHAPTER TWENTY

Elspeth Sedley and I left the burial service together at her suggestion, somewhat to my surprise. I had supposed that she would be preoccupied with the company of Patrick Kelleher, since Mrs. Sedley and her daughter were being buried in a common service, thus making Patrick and Elspeth the two chief mourners. However, Elspeth came out and walked back up to Sedley House with Meg Markham and me, the fourth member of the household, Mrs. Famblechook, being too overcome by grief and cooking sherry to appear at the church.

"Are we to wait for Mr. Kelleher?" I asked. And as Elspeth shook her head, I added, "I did not see Sir Nicholas at the service." I was careful to make the remark light and casual, not wishing my companions to guess how much this mattered to me. But the truth was, I had not seen him since he took me back to Sedley House the day of Megan Sedley's suicide, and now, within the next hour or so, my father would be arriving on the York Mail Coach to take me home to Cornwall. It was quite probable that I should never see Sir Nicholas again. This was a dampening reflection, so very much so that I felt I could understand Elspeth's

feeling for her Uncle Patrick and even sympathize with her, since it was growing obvious to me that a woman cannot always help falling in love, no matter how unsuitable the match may be. In any case, it was perfectly evident that Sir Nicholas regarded me as a "tiresome child." He had called me that often enough.

Nonetheless, I had been building many dreams upon the fantasy that one day he might forget his tragic first love and learn to care for me. And he could scarcely do so if we never met again!

"You asked about Uncle Patrick," Elspeth said as we passed the graveyard with our heads averted and entered Sedley House. "I do not think I shall see him again."

Meg Markham seemed to understand this perfectly, and she did not look surprised, but I could not imagine what had happened to provoke this extraordinary change in Elspeth.

"I suppose Aunt Megan must have found him out too," she remarked, closing her eyes for an instant, and I knew she was remembering the last twelve tragic years of the haunted and haunted woman. "I do not know why she made no effort to kill him when he was prowling about the inn, looking for her poor little horde of money."

"Do you think anyone will ever find it?"

She laughed harshly. "Two hours after Nicholas brought the cart and took Aunt Megan away, Uncle Patrick got word of it in Heatherton and came hurrying back. That night he was in the

Hag's Head, roaming around the attics where the poor . . . creature spent most of her time these past years. Frankly, I think he found the money. Not that it matters. Last night he asked me to come away with him. Said he thought he might have 'a few guineas' that would support us in great style in London. Doesn't that sound as though he'd found the money?"

I thought it did, and like Elspeth, I thought it no longer mattered.

"When Papa comes for me, don't you think you might go with us to Cornwall for a time? I am persuaded you would like it immensely. And anyone as pretty as you is sure to—" I thought I had better not suggest a new love when she had barely recovered from the old one, so I amended, "—sure to like the Cornish folk."

"Not quite yet. Later though, perhaps." She smiled at me faintly. "You are rather a dear. And clear as a looking glass."

I did not know how to accept that but felt too sorry for her to make an issue of it. We went upstairs, I to finish packing and she to go across the little hall into her grandmother's bed-sitting-room. It was not long before Mrs. Sedley's little tiger-striped kitten raced up the stairs and paused ever so briefly between the two rooms. Elspeth looked around as I did. Timothy looked from one to the other of us, then darted into my room and curled up in my open portmanteau, his enormous gray-green eyes looking up at me expectedly.

Elspeth called to me, "Timothy is yours, Kate. Grandmother would have wished it."

I was delighted, for if I could not have Nicholas Everett, I might at least give my affection to the little cat who had first brought us together. I was about to say as much, perhaps indirectly, when Meg Markham came and looked in upon Elspeth and me.

"Sir Nicholas and a . . . person from London wish to see Miss Bodmun."

Elspeth and I looked at each other. "Person?" she echoed, but the mystery was more comprehensible when we saw the odd little man with a face like a friendly rodent, a suit of scarlet and brown, and the largest cravat, slightly soiled, that we had ever seen.

"Ladies, may I present Jemmy Pike, of the Bow Street runners," said Sir Nicholas. "I fear I disturbed you both the morning I set out for Heatherton to send for a runner. When I returned I recall that you, and especially your friend Kelleher, seemed to regard me as the logical candidate for fiendish honors."

I could not forget our manners to him that dreadful morning outside the stables of Everett Hall, and even earlier, when I had mistaken him for the Hag who had entered my bedchamber. It was extraordinary to me that I should not have guessed that more than one person might have his boots stained by the mud of Seven Spinney.

I was furiously jealous when Elspeth came to meet Sir Nicholas and offered him her hand, which he kissed as she said, "Nicholas, I should insult your understanding if I attempted to explain. I ask only that you forgive my stupidity."

He smiled. It seemed to me that he looked a trifle older than I remembered, but no less exciting to me, and I thought I would become completely tongue-tied if he smiled at me in that tender and understanding fashion. I quite hated Elspeth for a moment or two!

"I could never think badly of Megan's niece," he said to her. Then he was cool and businesslike. "Now, Jemmy, Miss Bodmun will tell you whatever she recalls"—he hesitated only a second—"of whatever occurred after Miss Sedley and I left her at the inn."

I tried to make my story as brief as possible, but I was conscious all the time of Elspeth and Sir Nicholas, talking in low tones, too low for me to hear them. As a result, I finished my story rather more quickly than I might have in other circumstances and asked him, "Have you discovered yet who the original victim was, in the fire?"

The little man had been busily jotting down words now and then, which was a surprise in itself, for he did not look as though he had ever learned to read, much less to write. Sir Nicholas heard my question and came over to join us.

"It is assumed she was a onetime barmaid named

Hester Chawton. But nothing is certain except that the girl served at the inn briefly and was dismissed by Megan."

I turned and continued my packing so I should not have to see his face when I spoke of the woman he must have loved through all these years of her living death.

"She told me that she found the girl in the cellar and killed her and intended to kill Mr. Kelleher when he returned. But the fire started. Over the candle, I suspect."

"Aye. That'll be the way of it," Jemmy Pike agreed, nodding wisely. "Then, when the woman dragged herself out of the ruins, she must've knew she couldn't never come to be thought alive, what with the dead barmaid and that. There'd be the murder charge right enough. Trapped in that old place by her crime and by her hurts, if I may say so. Horrible to think on. Aye! That'll be it! And then the poor creature having to hide, and all, whenever folk come looking through the inn."

I did not look at Nicholas and went on busily with my packing, which was accomplished in my usual helter-skelter fashion.

"She . . . told me she had wished to kill me. I think it must have been she who followed me from the Hag's Head to the Hall that day, and then I saw her again that night when the dogs were disturbed."

I was tremendously relieved when Nicholas agreed without showing any signs of emotional involvement. "I knew there was someone playing

off rather unsavory tricks. But I thought it was Megan's husband—her widower. I meant to catch him out. Apparently, I was unfair to the fellow."

"No," said Elspeth quietly. "I do not think you were unfair. I know I thought those tracks upon the carpeting in your house belonged to Patrick. And all the while—poor Aunt Megan."

"Don't!" said Nicholas curtly. He came across the room to where I had my portmanteau laid out and began to repack my things, neatly and with the skill of long practice.

These army officers! I thought. *They are forever hearkening back to their precious "neatness"!*

Elspeth and the little Bow Street runner stepped into the bed-sitting-room across the hall, and I heard them discussing the crimes. As I watched Nicholas pack for me, feeling inadequate and yet oddly cross about it, my thoughts reverted to the times I had ventured into the Hag's Head, the shadowy face, the sounds, the sight that had caused prowling Macrae to fall and crack his skull, the dreadful trek of Mrs. Sedley from the Hall to the inn, pursuing this monstrous apparition which she must have recognized as her unfortunate daughter. Small wonder the wretched woman had died of it!

"I must hurry," I said, trying to change the direction of my thoughts. "Papa will be fetching me onto the York Mail as it passes, and there will be only a very short wait."

"It is waiting now, with your Papa," said Nicholas, with one dark eyebrow raised. "You are the most careless child imaginable. Don't you know you will ruin your things if you treat them so?"

His indifference to my departure was so dreadful that I felt the first tickling of my nose, which meant that I was about to cry. I sniffed mightily and shrugged off his warning. "I do not in the least care, I assure you. In Cornwall we have less trivial thoughts."

He did not argue with me but took up my portmanteau and my beribboned band box, upsetting Timothy.

Elspeth and I embraced briefly. I picked up Timothy, repeated my invitation to Elspeth, then shook hands with Meg Markham and gave her a friendly message for Mrs. Famblechook. There was time for no more, for Sir Nicholas had already gone ahead of me and was striding down the street with my luggage in one hand. I hurried after him. He reached for my fingers. I felt blissfully content wth my hand in his while I hugged Timmy's soft body to me during the walk to the bottom of the hill. There the York Mail Coach waited while the coachman and several male passengers drank their fill in the Owl of York.

Waiting at the foot of the hill was Father, and as I caught sight of him, massive and heavily wrapped against the sharp northern climate, Sir Nicholas let me go. I ran to Father and asked him why he

had not come to Sedley House so I could see him sooner.

He looked over my head at Sir Nicholas and, surprisingly enough, smiled at him. "Ay, lass, but why would I be doing that when a great gentlemen like His Worship asked me to wait. Said he had somewhat to say to you."

"Yes, but when did you meet him?"

"I assure you, Kathleen," said Sir Nicholas, "the York Mail takes all manner of passengers, even magistrates. I simply ascended the York Mail in Heatherton and rode to Maidenmoor. Paying my sixpence-ha'penny, of course."

I looked from one to the other of the men. They seemed to have a complete understanding.

"That he did, Kate," said Father. "And what's more, we've his luggage atop the coach, safe as may be. He goes to London Town and on to Cornwall with us!"

"Certainly," Sir Nicholas went on in that infuriatingly calm, businesslike voice. "I tell you here and now, I do not intend to carry you off to marry you at Gretna Green like any bumpkin. I must make the acquaintance of your mother. For aught I know, she may be a wrecker's child!"

"No, no," I assured him hastily. "That was Grandmother Kathleen that was the wrecker's daughter!"

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